

Sunlight Through Pines

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Sunlight Through Pines

by [handsofstardust](#)

Summary

Nie Huaisang has a chance to go back and do things over. Things move at their own pace from there.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nie Huaisang opened his eyes to morning sunlight and realised he wasn't in his chambers. Or rather, he wasn't in the chambers of the Qinghe Nie sect leader. No, instead he found himself staring at a nostalgically familiar pattern of swallows and grasses, inked long ago by a mother he barely remembered. He turned his head and sucked in a shuddering breath as he recognised his old chambers, smaller than those of the sect leader, but homely and safe.

He frowned, then sat up.

There were fewer fans on his walls, and many of them were crudely painted, like they were when he started painting. His songbird cage was missing, and he noticed the hair pins lying on his dressing table were simpler in design, like the ones he'd worn as a child.

Eyes widening, he threw back his blankets and saw legs and a body that were much smaller than they were meant to be, clad in a child's green sleeping robe. Shock coursed through him and he threw back his blankets and scrambled to his feet, hurrying to his dresser. Once he was close enough, he saw the face staring back at him had the soft, rounded features of almost-adolescence, large pale brown eyes and hair that was cut just above his shoulders.

The first thing his malfunctioning brain spat out at him was: *I'm much more adorable than I remember being.*

The second thing he said out loud, tone distant and dreamy. "I've gone back in time..."

He wracked his brain furiously, thinking of what could have triggered this. He remembered getting black out drunk due to indescribable loneliness in one of the many pavilions in the garden. He vaguely remembered staggering back towards the main house... then tilting sideways towards a pond as walking just became all to much for him.

He blinked and mused to himself, "Perhaps I hit my head and died. Maybe the gods have decided to make me do everything over."

He froze. Do everything over. If the gods had truly sent him back in time, then that meant...

Without warning he heard the sound of stomping and suddenly the doors to his room were thrown open with a bang. "Huaisang! You were supposed to be practising your sabre twenty minutes ago!"

Huaisang gaped. There in the doorway stood the towering form of Nie Mingjue, all one hundred and ninety-one centimetres of him with his head still mercifully attached to his shoulders.

His brother tilted his chin up and snapped, “Why are you just standing there? I promise, I will break your legs if you don’t-.”

Huaisang let out a wail and burst into tears, running forward and wrapping his arms around his brother’s waist, sobbing into his chest. He felt his brother tense before he said with a huff, “Huaisang, don’t think you’ll be getting out of-.”

“Da-ge, you’re not dead!” Huaisang howled. “You’re limbs are all attached! I’m so happy!”

There was a long pause, interspersed with Huaisang’s sobs and sniffles. After a few more seconds Mingjue took him firmly by the shoulders broke his embrace, frowning at him. “Huaisang, you’re too old to be having these reactions to nightmares.”

Huaisang laughed through his tears, letting giddy elation wash over him. “I thought I was alone again brother. I was so lonely.” He seized Mingjue’s hand and met his brother’s startled gaze. “Promise me you’re not going to leave me da-ge!”

Mingjue looked a little uneasy, and his gaze may have softened a little, but he masked it quickly with annoyance. “I’m not going anywhere. But you’re going to the practise yard.” He grabbed Huaisang by the scruff of his robe and effortlessly carried him over to his clothes chest, dropping him in front of it unceremoniously. “Get dressed and come to the yard. If you’re not there in five minutes you’re sleeping in the dog house tonight.”

Huaisang was too happy to do anything but comply.

There was no end of amusement to Huaisang when he realised the one thing that concerned his brother more than anything was Huaisang actually practising his sabre forms without complaint. Mingjue seemed to become more and more concerned each time he paced up and down the rows of disciples and found Huaisang diligently, albeit thoughtlessly, cycling through the sabre forms.

Knowing what he did about their family’s history of qi deviations, Huaisang usually avoided sabre practise like the plague. However, he was so elated to be around the version of his brother that wasn’t a shambling, murderous corpse that he figured he was safe for now. The repetitive motions also gave his mind time to race.

He was obviously in the time before his tutelage at the Cloud Recesses, before the Sunshot Campaign, before everything that followed. However, his father’s death was still a raw wound to Mingjue and Wen Ruohan was a growing tyrant, so no doubt the Sunshot Campaign was inevitable.

Huaisang bit his lip. He had to prevent his brother’s death. He couldn’t go through that pain again. He just had to find the elements he needed to change in order to alter his brother’s fate. The Sunshot Campaign had to happen. Wen Ruohan wouldn’t be able to coexist peacefully with the other clans. However...

His movements faltered and his let his arms drop to his sides. He stared at the paving at his feet, recalling a long ago conversation speaking of peaceful spring times in Yunping.

“Huaisang!” his brother barked, stomping over. “No resting!”

Huaisang’s gaze snapped towards his brother and he said excitedly, “Da-ge! I want to go to Yunping!”

Mingjue paused, blinking, then suddenly reached out to feel Huaisang’s forehead. “You are behaving very strangely. Are you getting sick?”

Huaisang batted his hand away and persisted, “I’m fine, but I want to go to Yunping! A friend told me it’s beautiful at this time of the year and I want to try the win- I mean, the lotus cakes!”

There was genuine concern in Mingjue’s expression now, but of course he still sounded angry as he snapped, “What are you talking about? We don’t know anyone from Yunping!”

Huaisang rolled his eyes. “Someone doesn’t have to be from Yunping to recommend going there da-ge People have just told me it’s nice!”

Mingjue glared at him, then let out an irritated huff. “No, I don’t have the time and neither do you. Now stop this nonsense and get back to practising.”

Huaisang didn’t have time for his brother’s stubbornness, so he immediately wailed, threw himself on the ground and began rolling around. “Da-ge is so cruel to me! He never wants to do anything with me! All I want is to spend time with da-ge!”

“Huaisang!” hissed Mingjue, scandalised.

By now the other disciples had stopped practising and were gaping at the spectacle. Huaisang flopped over onto his stomach and looked up at the nearest senior disciples, making sure they could see his tears and runny nose. “I think da-ge hates me!”

Sympathy flashed over the disciples’ faces as a hand fastened around Huaisang’s collar and hauled him to his feet. Mingjue had gone very red in the face and snapped, “Huaisang, stop this at once! This is no way for the future leader of the Qinghe Nie sect to act!”

“Sect Leader Nie.”

Both brothers’ gazes went to the brave disciple, who instantly looked like he regretted every decision he’d ever made. He swallowed, eyeing the sabre in Mingjue’s hand before he continued, “If I may... I believe the Young Master may truly be lonely Sect Leader. You are often too busy with the business of the sect, and the honourable former Sect Leader and his Lady are no longer with us, so... this servant believes that the Young Master’s distress is understandable.”

“Oh you do, do you?” barked Mingjue, making the disciple flinch. However, his anger seemed to fade a little, and he set a sniffling Huaisang down and said firmly, “I will try to spend more time with you Huaisang, but I cannot go to Yunping. It is too far and I have too much important work to do here.”

Huaisang wracked his brains quickly. He had to get his brother's agreeance now otherwise there wouldn't be enough time to change things. His eyes widened and he resisted the urge to smile when he suddenly remembered a very interesting item he'd found when clearing out Mingjue's belongings after his death.

With one finger he beckoned for Mingjue to lean in closer, which his brother did, frowning deepening. Huaisang cupped a hand next to his mouth and murmured in Mingjue's ear, "If we don't go to Yunping, I'm going to tell First Brother Lan about those poems you wrote about him."

Mingjue froze. Huaisang had seen many expressions on his brother's face before. Anger. Triumph. Anger. Irritation. Anger. Concentration. Anger again. Never before had he seen the all-consuming dread in his brother's eyes that he was seeing now.

"How do you know about that?" Mingjue muttered. His face twisted. "If you were snooping around in my room, I'll break your-."

"Calm, da-ge!" whispered Huaisang. "I have my ways. And it does not matter *how* I came to know about them, only that I *do*. So? What do you think?"

Mingjue looked as if he had sucked on a lemon before he sagged and muttered, "Fine. I'll take you to Yunping, you little snake."

Huaisang clapped his hands delightedly, smile brighter than the sun.

Yunping was warm and vibrant and lively and altogether better than the Unclean Realm in Huaisang's opinion. Sure, he would always love the mountains and the smell of the pines of his home, but everything was so grey and rigid, particularly amongst his stiff clansmen. Here the streets were bustling with merchants and entertainers, the fronds of willow trees casting out over the streets and colourful kites soaring high above them. Huaisang sighed happily as a warm breeze laced with blossom brushed over his cheeks, and he was practically skipping as he wound his way through the streets.

Mingjue followed closely behind him, out of place and impatient. Huaisang had almost told him to go away at one point, only to remember he was still just a child in his brother's eyes and such a command would earn him a smack. Instead he put his faith in his brother's single-minded focus on watching him in overwhelming situations, and it hopefully being strong enough for Mingjue not to realise what particular district they were wandering into.

"Huaisang, slow down!" Mingjue called loudly, causing some of the crowd to bend away from him. Huaisang paid him no mind and grinned as he spotted the unlit red lanterns hanging over a street up ahead.

He picked up his pace and ducked into the street, finding himself wandering down a street he would probably revisit in later years. Customers and courtesans alike watched him curiously as he walked by, looking around for details his (former?) friend had told him in his more vulnerable moments.

“Wait a minute- *Huaisang!*” The rage in his brother’s voice was like fire licking at his heels and Huaisang broke into a run. “You little- Huaisang, get back here!”

Huaisang raced through the red lantered streets, using the crowds as his cover for his irate brother. Even if he got caught now, he just needed to find the location. He could sneak away later to try to draw his quarry out.

He rounded a corner and skidded to a halt, staring. He heard Mingjue thundering up behind him, half shouting, “Huaisang, I don’t know what kind of joke you think-.”

Huaisang turned around and shushed him. Mingjue was so shocked he stopped dead, before his face started purpling in anger. He opened his mouth to no doubt scream at him but Huaisang turned around and pointed. “Look there.”

Huaisang had always known Meng Yao to be calm and composed, occasionally warm and soft when they had been close during the Sunshot Campaign. It had only been those last few moments when the rage and panic had surfaced, presenting an entirely different image than the man’s usual serenity. The Meng Yao that stood before them now was neither efficient assistant or calculating mastermind. He was merely... young.

He stood out the front of a well appointed brothel, his hair cut to his shoulders and eyes trained on the ground as he diligently swept the pathway. His forehead was free of vermillion, his cheeks hadn’t quite lost their childish roundness and there was no hard edge to his gaze as he focussed on his work. However, as Huaisang watched him he noticed the poised nature of his slender frame, as if any moment he were expecting an attack.

“Why are we looking at this boy?” asked Mingjue. His tone was annoyed, but when Huaisang glanced up at him he saw no small amount of curiosity in his brother’s expression. He wondered what his reaction would be if he told Mingjue that this boy could be the death of him one day.

Instead Huaisang hurried towards the boy.

“Huaisang!” snapped Mingjue, following his brother, and Meng Yao’s head turned at the sharpness in his tone, amber eyes guarded as they approached.

Huaisang stopped in front of the teenager, a whirl of emotions in his chest. Hatred still flared as he took in the familiar features, but so did the wistfulness of a long lost friendship forged during the hardships of war. Staring at this softer, kinder version of Meng Yao, he knew he had to make sure things were different this time.

As Mingjue came stomping up behind Huaisang, Meng Yao said politely, “I’m sorry Young Masters, but this establishment is closed at the moment. If you would like to return in an hour...”

“No.” Mingjue’s voice was harsh as he picked Huaisang up by his scruff again, and Huaisang wondered if he would be going for a swim in the lake at the look in his brother’s eyes. “We are certainly *not* here for your establishment’s services.”

Huaisang gave a faltering grin before looking to Meng Yao and saying, “No, we’re just here for you!”

There was a beat.

“What?” said Mingjue.

“I’m sorry?” said Meng Yao.

Huaisang started wriggling and Mingjue set him down on the ground. He looked up at Meng Yao again, smiling gently as he said, “Your one of Jin Guangshan’s kids, right?”

Meng Yao’s expression shuttered and Mingjue’s head snapped towards the boy. Huaisang could tell his brother was trying to pick out Sect Leader Jin’s features. Meng Yao pointedly ignored the attention and said quietly, “I wouldn’t know anything about that Young Master. I can assure you that I am uninterested in trying to claim any privileges from my bloodline.”

Huaisang waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t care about any of that. I just think it’s a waste that someone who could be a cultivator is being left to rot here. Especially someone as smart as you!”

“Huaisang...” said Mingjue, warning plain in his tone.

Meng Yao looked uncertain, clinging to the broom as if he could hide behind it. This vulnerable, scared version of Meng Yao was an enigma to Huaisang, and made pity spark in his stomach. He suddenly held a new appreciation for the brave face the boy put on when he had arrived at the Nie Sect the first time.

“Forgive me Young Master, but I don’t see why you have come to me now,” murmured Meng Yao, not meeting either of the Nie brothers’ gazes.

“I’m here because I want you to come back to Qinghe with us!” exclaimed Huaisang, mustering up all the childlike innocence he could.

Meng Yao’s eyes widened, but before he or Huaisang could say anything more, Mingjue seized Huaisang by the arm and started to drag him down the street towards the lake. Huaisang looked back frantically and called, “Don’t go anywhere! I still need to talk to you!”

The brothers reached the end of the street and Huaisang stumbled a little as Mingjue pulled him around so they were facing each other. The Sect Leader’s expression was fierce as Huaisang protested, “Da-ge-.”

“You may be my heir,” said Mingjue in the cold tone he reserved for when Huaisang had *really* done something wrong, “but you cannot make decisions like that without consulting me first. Especially when you can instil false hope in the unfortunate. Am I perfectly clear Huaisang?”

“Da-ge, please, I’ll explain everything to you later, but it’s important that-,” Huaisang tried.

“You’re going to march back their and apologise to the boy,” snapped Mingjue, shaking his head. “I knew you were irresponsible, but never in my life did I think you could do something as thoughtless as this.”

“Da-ge, he has to come with us! He will be a brilliant cultivator, and a loyal-.”

“He cannot!” Mingjue bellowed. He visibly pulled in his anger before he hissed at Huaisang, “If what you say is true, then he is no doubt the son of one of the women who works in that place. We cannot have such bloodlines tainting our sect!”

“That doesn’t matter!” Huaisang burst out. Shouted. He shouted in anger in the middle of the street, and that was enough to make Mingjue speechless for a moment. Huaisang glanced back towards Meng Yao and saw the boy was still standing there, looking as though he were going to bolt into the brothel at any moment. Huaisang calmed himself and grabbed the front of his brother’s robes, craning his neck to meet his gaze. “I promise, once we are alone, I will tell you what I know. But right now, all you need to know is that that boy will either be one of your closest allies or your greatest enemy, depending on what happens now.”

Mingjue looked too shell shocked to respond, so Huaisang left him by the lake as he hurried back to Meng Yao. The boy eyed him nervously as he approached and said, “Sorry about that. So, I want you to come back to Qinghe with us. You could be a great cultivator, and I think your talent will be wasted here!” Meng Yao shook his head fervently and Huaisang blinked. “I promise we have no ulterior motives! And life in Qinghe can be hard but at least it will be better than living in a brothel. And also...” Huaisang gave a bright smile, deciding to play on Meng Yao’s most obvious vice. “You can learn to be powerful.”

Meng Yao hesitated, and Huaisang suppressed his triumphant smirk. However, before he could pat himself on the back Meng Yao said softly, “The Young Master is very kind, but I don’t believe your brother would be willing. And also...” The boy swallowed, nervous in a way Huaisang had never seen before. “My mother is here, and she cannot leave so easily. And I will not abandon her.”

Huaisang wanted to hit himself. How could he have forgotten Meng Yao’s devotion to his mother? And of course she would still be alive at this time!

Before he could say anything more, the front door of the establishment opened and a man in grey robes stepped out. His eyes widened when he saw Huaisang, before a scowl twisted his features and he stomped over to cuff Meng Yao on the back of the head. “Why are you bothering this Young Master, boy! I warned you not to make anymore trouble!” He turned to Huaisang, a simpering smile on his face. “Terribly sorry Young Master. This kid is a brat who doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut...”

“The boy has done nothing wrong,” boomed Mingjue, making the man jump as he strode towards them. The man seemed to shrink as Mingjue stopped in front of him, towering over them all. “Make sure you learn the circumstances of a dispute before you punish your workers. You will never earn their respect or the respect of your customers if you distribute punishments so unjustly.”

“Of course you are right Master!” said the man, bowing. “Please forgive my hastiness. I have merely learned over the years that this boy can be quick to start trouble. If I have offended you, I can offer a discount on our services. We have many lovely women who would be glad to attend to you this evening.” His eyes suddenly slewed to Meng Yao, who paled. “Or if something else has caught your eye...”

“Of course not!” snapped Mingjue, though Huaisang noticed his ears had turned pink. Huaisang smirked, but that quickly vanished when his brother’s glare turned on him. “My little brother and I will depart now, *won’t we* Huaisang?”

Huaisang could see murder in his brother’s eyes so he nodded frantically. Mingjue jerked his head back the way they had come and said, “Let’s go. We’ve wasted enough time here as it is.”

With that his brother stomped away, Huaisang struggling to keep up with his long strides. Huaisang glanced over his shoulder briefly to see that the man was already berating Meng Yao in hushed tones, who was staring at the ground with a blank expression that was worryingly familiar. Huaisang set his jaw and looked away, steeling himself. If he wanted to stop Meng Yao from becoming the monster he could be, then Meng Shi would need to be rescued too.

And for that, he’d need some help from his dear brother.

Chapter End Notes

I actually got the idea for a time travel story from tumblr, but now I can't find the post. Thank you to whoever inspired me!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mingjue opened the door to his brother's room and peered inside, half fearing he would find only empty blankets. Instead he saw his brother lying on his back, sound asleep in the darkened room, looking peaceful and innocent in slumber. Mingjue paused, worry curling in his chest before he sighed and closed the door, returning to his table where wine and a report from Qinghe waited. He opened the scroll and tried to read, but his mind wouldn't be distracted from his brother's odd behaviour.

Ever since he had had that meltdown, Huaisang had been acting strangely. Mingjue was used to his brother's tears and tantrums, but never had he seen that desperate light in his eyes before as he begged for him to take in the young man from the brothel. This entire trip had him on edge. All throughout it Huaisang had been far too alert, far too calculating. Almost as if he were a different person entirely.

He sighed, downing another cup of wine as worried anger rose in his chest. He felt as though he had been locked out of a room and Huaisang was inside, talking with... *someone* about things Mingjue needed to know. His hand tightened on the small cup. He thought of his stepmother in the last stages of her illness, begging him to protect Huaisang. He thought of his father's last moments, raving and throwing himself against the walls in the grips of a qi deviation.

He shuddered. Could this new strangeness in Huaisang be the result of a qi imbalance? He knew deviations and imbalances usually manifested more violently, but it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for there to be other forms of the ailment. Huaisang was still a Nie, no matter how frivolous and lazy he seemed, and perhaps like Huaisang himself, his qi deviation would take a softer form.

Mingjue leaned heavily against the table. This was too much for him to wrap his head around. He would write to Xichen and get his forever steady friend's opinion on the matter. His words had never failed to bring Mingjue comfort.

Inadvertently, his mind slipped to the young man they had met in the street. Once Huaisang had mentioned the boy's heritage Mingjue had been able to spot some resemblance to the fool of Koi Tower, though the boy was much prettier than the father. Not that Mingjue was going to examine that particular train of thought. He had seemed so delicate, a sharp gleam of intelligence in those fathomless golden eyes. Given Huaisang's infatuation, Mingjue would have called the boy a witch, and yet he seemed just as shocked as Mingjue by the turn of events. And then there was what Huaisang had said the boy would do...

Mingjue sighed pouring himself another cup of wine and downing it. He didn't like leaping into things blind, and right now he felt like he was blindfolded and being led around a pit of vipers by his little brother who couldn't even master basic sabre forms. Needless to say, he didn't like the feeling and it made him want to break things.

Huaisang woke up when he heard the sharp clink of ceramic against wood. He sat up slowly, looking around the darkened bedroom and noticing incense was still burning in the room behind the paper dividing screens. His brother was still up, and judging by the irritated sigh he wafted through the screen, he wasn't in the best of moods. He had been sullen and irritable all afternoon, not that Huaisang could blame him. The situation would be confusing for anyone.

He bit his lip, considering. He doubted he would ever be able to pull Meng Yao onto a better path without his brother's cooperation, and to get that he needed a good explanation. Huaisang picked at his mattress. Could he simply tell the truth? No, his brother would never believe him. They'd be back at Qinghe before he could blink. Or even worse, he'd be shipped off to the Cloud Recesses for some sort of qi therapy.

He paused. Time travel was a bit far-fetched for his ever practical brother to believe... but visions of the future were not outside the realm of reality.

Steeling himself, Huaisang stood up, pulled his sleeping robe tighter around his wiry frame, and went to the door. He slid the screen aside to reveal his brother glowering at a scroll with a wine cup in hand. Mingjue looked over when he heard the door and frowned, saying, "What's wrong? You should be sleeping."

Huaisang closed the door and went to sit next to his brother, leaning against the low, dark table. Mingjue watched him almost warily as Huaisang said, "I think I need to explain some things to you."

Mingjue's eyes widened before his face twisted into a scowl. He set the cup down heavily and said through gritted teeth, "Yes, you do."

Huaisang was silent for a moment considering his words. Eventually he said, "Remember when I was late for sabre practise last week?" Mingjue nodded and Huaisang almost chuckled. He must have been behaving very strangely for something as ordinary as being late to sabre practise stood out to his brother. "Well that night... I had a strange dream."

Mingjue's frown deepened. "A dream?"

Huaisang nodded. "The only way I could describe it is prophetic. I saw... a future. A very dark future. But..." Huaisang took a deep breath, feeling a weight lifting from his chest. "Even though that future was dark, I felt when I woke up that I had been given a gift. I knew what I would have to do in order to stop this future from materialising."

Mingjue was looking at him as if he had grown a second head. "Huaisang-."

"Please listen to me Da-ge," pleaded Huaisang, his interruption bold enough to make his brother pause. "In this future, I saw you die. I watched as a qi deviation ripped you apart from the inside, and I later found out it was because someone we had both trusted murdered you to please his father." Huaisang seized Mingjue's hand, making sure to look him in the eyes. "That person's name was Jin Guangyao, and that boy we met today will become that person if we don't intervene."

Mingjue was close to gaping at him before he withdrew his hand and said in a low voice, “Huaisang, are you hearing yourself? How can you expect me to believe this?”

“I knew about your poems,” said Huaisang quickly, making Mingjue freeze. “I also know that you’re already talking to Lan Qiren about me attending lectures in the Cloud Recesses in two years time. Which is a silly idea by the way, it is incredibly dull and stuffy in that place.”

Mingjue was completely still as he stared at him, then asked, “How long have you had the gift of foresight?”

Huaisang paused, then murmured, “I’ve only had one dream. It was a long and dark dream. A nightmare, really, with little glimmers of hope throughout.”

“You’ve been speaking differently.”

Huaisang gave him a weak smile. “The dream made me feel different.”

Mingjue seemed to be battling himself. After a moment he took a deep breath and asked, “If what you say is true... then why shouldn’t I just cut the boy down the moment we see him next?”

Huaisang paused. He wouldn’t lie, a part of him found the idea tempting. For years he had been forced to live in terror and put on a simpering, smiling mask to make sure the monster suspected nothing. For years he had to pretend to adore the grinning snake that had murdered his brother for some idea of recognition that would never come. However... he also couldn’t help but think of the kindly brother that had snuck him new fans and paints, had taught him the romantic poetry of Yunping, had comforted him when his brother’s temper had led to vicious words between them. Now that he was faced with that version of Meng Yao again, he found that he wasn’t willing to give that up.

“There is something dark in him,” Huaisang admitted. “Growing up as he has, that darkness is unavoidable. But I also know there is a lot of good in him, and if we keep him away from certain... things, he will be invaluable to the Qinghe Nie sect in the future.”

His brother was quiet for a long time. So long Huaisang thought he might have been wordlessly dismissed. However, just as he was preparing to leave his brother with his thoughts, Mingjue turned to him and said, “Very well. I will see if you’re speaking the truth. Now what do you need me to do?”

Nie Mingjue never backed down from a challenge. He abhorred weakness and cowardice, and always encouraged for people to charge at life’s struggles head on. But at this very moment, as he stood in the red lantered entrance room of the brothel, the madam dipping her head and giving him simpering smile after simpering smile and courtesans giggling at him from the stairway, he wished the ground would open up and swallow him. He was ashamed at himself for allowing Huaisang to talk him into this, prophetic visions or not.

“Terribly sorry for the wait Young Master!” the madam gushed, the crows feet at the corners of her eyes deepening as she smiled. “Meng Shi can be a bit fussy with her preparations, but I

assure you it will be worth the wait.”

“I don’t mind,” Mingjue said gruffly, wishing the woman would stop talking.

Thankfully, she seemed to receive some sort of signal from the upper floors and beckoned him towards the dark wood staircase near the waiting area. “This way please, Young Master. She is ready now.”

Mingjue kept his head down as he followed the woman to the staircase and ascended, ignoring the bowing courtesans as he went. There was a floral scent permeating the brothel that was trying to cover something acrid, and it became stronger as they reached the second floor. They walked along a long dim corridor hung with more red lanterns, passing rows of sliding latticed doors, decorated with painted flowers and high pitched giggles emanating from a few of them. There was a feeling in the air that set Mingjue’s teeth on edge and had his hand twitching towards Baxia.

They passed a door that stood slightly ajar and from within he heard a snippet of angry conversation.

“-that little viper under control if you don’t want to have this entire place shut down!”

“You are right Master, we are so terribly sorry, and rest assured the boy will be harshly disciplined-.”

Mingjue frowned as they drifted out of earshot. He thought of the man’s immediate anger towards Huaisang’s boy the other afternoon and a troubled feeling settled in his chest.

He was led to a set of doors decorated fittingly with a pattern of peonies. The woman swept them aside for him, revealing a low lit room furnished with red curtains, a low table surrounded by gaudy cushions, and an extravagant bed. The room itself was a simple veneer of luxury that riled Mingjue’s few sensibilities, but the sight of the woman waiting for him quickly quietened his irritation.

Since entering the establishment he had heard so much prattle about the beauty and elegance of Meng Shi that he had decided it all to be exaggeration. However, seeing her now he was shocked to see they spoke the truth.

She was a small woman with a dainty figure, tantalising hidden by robes the colour of red begonias, which was reflected in her son’s stature. Long dark hair spilled in a perfected curtain over her shoulders, held in place by colourful, flowered pins and clips and a jade comb. She had delicate features, painted over with white and red make up, and amber eyes watched him approach with welcoming caution.

“Meng Shi will take care of your needs well Young Master,” said the woman, before she bowed out of the room, closing the door as she went.

The silence she left in her wake was unbearable. Mingjue wanted to throw himself out the nearest window or die from embarrassment on the spot. He didn’t know where to look, and

when he risked looking into Meng Shi's face his embarrassment only increased due to the amused smile on her perfectly rouged lips.

"How would the Young Master like this servant to service him tonight?" she asked softly, her voice gentle and melodic. He couldn't tell if she was mocking him or not and that irked him further.

"Pour wine," he grunted, stomping over to slouch beside the low table, slamming a heavy palm down onto its polished top.

Meng Shi remained unaffected by his brash manners, taking small steps to sit beside him. As she lowered herself gracefully onto the cushions he saw a bound foot peek out from the hem of her robes. His gaze drifted up to watch the way she prepared his beverage, and he found himself mesmerised by the elegant way she handled each cup and bottle. Once the wine was poured she handed him a cup, her fingers lingering over his own a little too long.

He jerked his hand away and snapped, "No! I don't want-." Seeing her shocked expression he reigned his temper in and grumbled, "I'm not here for... *that*." At the confused look she gave him he downed his wine and looked her dead in the eye. "Is it true that your son was fathered by Jin Guangshan?"

Meng Shi froze, her eyes widening. There was a beat of silence before she whispered, a painfully hopeful tone in her voice, "Did he send you for us? Can my son join the cultivation world?" Mingjue frowned and she suddenly started digging around in her robes. A second later she produced a single pearl pin, brandishing it at him like it was the key to the universe. "He-He gave me this. He promised he would come back for me. And I know Meng Yao could be a talented cultivator with the correct training!"

"That pin is just a trinket," said Mingjue flatly. He felt somewhat guilty for the expression of pure shock that came over Meng Shi's face, but her naivety unnerved him. "Jin Guangshan didn't send me. He won't come back for you. Not only are you of common birth, but he would not risk upsetting Madam Jin by bringing you into the household. Especially since you have a son that could upset her own son's standing."

Meng Shi was as still as a statue. Then her hands began to shake and she hung her head, hiding her face as she whispered, "But... he told me-."

"Whatever he told you, he probably told the same thing to dozens of other women," Mingjue snapped, shifting against his cushion. He could throw himself into a life and death conflict with near glee, but he felt inadequate for handling delicate things such as this. He was sure even Huaisang, young as he is, would be better suited for this.

Meng Shi wasn't silent for a long time, angling her face so he couldn't see her, before she said, "So why are you here then? To torment me? To discourage me from causing trouble among the great Sects." Her head suddenly snapped up and he was shocked by the fire in her eyes, despite the tears streaking her cheeks. "Even if what you say is true Young Master, my son has a right to learn the path of Cultivation. It's in his blood, and I will not allow him to be kept from it."

“Good!” said Mingjue, relieved that she’d made his task easier. Meng Shi looked surprised and he ploughed on, “My brother has taken an interest in your son and would like you both to return to our Sect with us.”

A dark cloud stole over Meng Shi’s face and Mingjue could almost see her hackles rising. He blanched and said quickly, “Er, no, not like- I didn’t mean- My brother is barely thirteen!” She subsided a little. Mingjue scratched the back of his head, struggling for words. Why did Huaisang always have to make things so difficult? “My brother has... an instinct of sorts. He knows... I suppose he knows intelligence when he sees it. He recognised your son’s potential, and doesn’t want it to go to waste. And if he’s correct in his assessment... neither do I.”

Meng Shi regarded him cautiously, and he was glad to see that she was not completely naïve, despite falling for Jin Guangshan’s charms. She shook her head and murmured, “I don’t understand. What do you want out of this?”

Mingjue shrugged. “My brother has taken an interest in your son, and I am always open to new cultivators entering my Sect, so long as they work hard.”

“And me?”

Mingjue frowned at her, noticing the already resigned expression on her face. Discomfort reared inside him again and he grumbled, “The staff here kept bragging to me about how refined and well educated you are, so surely you’ll make a good house servant.” Her eyes widened in shock and he folded his arms. “So? Will you come with us to Qinghe?”

The woman paused, looking at a point over Mingjue’s shoulder. Silence stretched between them as she bit her lip, a torn expression in her eyes. Finally she bowed and said, “Young Master is very kind, but I will have to discuss this with my son. Can you give us some time?”

“We will leave Yunping tomorrow afternoon, and will stop by here on the way back home,” said Mingjue gruffly, rising. Why couldn’t people ever be decisive? “You have to have your answer by then, or the offer won’t be extended again, understand?”

Meng Shi bowed deeply to him, her forehead almost touching the floor. “Thank you Young Master. I promise, we will have made our decision by then.”

Mingjue glanced at her prostrated form and thought of the way her son tightly clutched the broom handle, the slight tremble in his hands. He inexplicably hoped they would say yes.

Meng Yao’s bruised ribs ached as the brothel master threw him into his mother’s room and snapped, “Get him under control woman, or I won’t be so lenient next time.”

“Yes sir!” came his mother’s breathy voice, and suddenly he was engulfed by her flowing pink robes and the floral scent he knew she used to hide the scent of clients. The door slammed shut and his mother cupped his face gently, guiding him to look into her worried face. Her eyes widened at the undoubtedly impressive bruise on his cheek and she whispered, “Oh my boy, my sweet boy...”

“It’s nothing,” he said, smiling and turning his face away. “It will heal soon enough.”

“A-Yao, you have to stop intervening like that,” said his mother quietly as he helped her stand. He kept a smile on his face and listened as he helped her stand and supported her unsteady path to the table. “I’ve had clients be rough before. That wasn’t anything I couldn’t have handled.”

“He hit you,” said Meng Yao coolly, helping her sit.

“He was drunk,” she protested. She smiled. “A few sweet words and I could have calmed him again.”

“I’m not just going to stand by and watch some bastard raise a hand against my mother,” replied Meng Yao, also sitting. Not even the ache of his ribs would make him repent his actions. He smiled softly. “I would be a coward for sitting idle, and what would my father say if he found out that’s what I was?”

Something changed and twisted in his mother’s face. She tried to hide it but he was too quick, worry blooming in his chest as he asked, “Mother? What’s wrong?”

She bit her lip, hesitant, until she finally said, “I had a client today, who was the leader of one of the larger cultivation sects. He- He offered to take us in and teach you cultivation.”

Meng Yao immediately thought of the younger boy and the intimidating man he’d met in the street. A spark that was half fear and half anger shot through him. Why was this young boy so fixated on him that he would send his brother to come and speak with his mother about the issue?

His mother was watching him carefully. “Do you know him?”

“I think I met him and his younger brother in the street yesterday,” said Meng Yao uncertainly. “What answer did you give him?”

She shook her head. “I told him I needed to think and talk with you. He gave us until tomorrow afternoon to come up with an answer.”

Meng Yao let out a humourless laugh. “You mean to come to terms with our forced consent. When a rich little lord wants something, there’s no way common people like us can turn him down.” His hands tightened against his pants. “What’s the catch? What were his terms?”

His mother shook her head. “He didn’t mention any. He seemed like an upstanding sort of person to be frank. He didn’t even touch me once.” She swallowed before leaning forward to take Meng Yao’s hand. “My darling, I know you are suspicious. I am too. But I think we need to take this for the great opportunity it is.” Meng Yao frowned. “He’s offering to teach you cultivation, and he even... he even admitted to knowing your father. Perhaps this is your chance to be recognised.”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened as his looked at her, treacherous hope worming its way through his bones. There was something shadowed in her eyes, and he knew she was still hiding

something, but he could tell he wouldn't be getting it out of her now. She offered him a weak smile and said, "And at least it will be a chance for us to get out of here."

He stared at her for a long time until finally, still holding onto his reservations, he nodded.

He still held those reservations as he saw the little lord's bright smile and watched the brothel keeper's eyes bug out when he heard the amount Sect Leader Nie was offering for both of their freedoms. He still held onto them as they moved with the convoy of Nie cultivators escorting their lords, all of whom seemed to shoot at least one dirty look towards him and his mother, as Yunping and their old lives drifted further and further away.

Chapter End Notes

Lockdown blues and uni assignments and computer malfunctions, oh my! The great trifecta of not getting writing done. Shorter chapter sorry, but I hope you enjoy!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Huaisang spent the journey to Qinghe watching Meng Yao, and only half of that time getting caught. As far as he could tell.

Through his observations he felt as though he were developing some form of whiplash. He would look at that youthful face and remember the faithful soldier who organised his brother's affairs and helped teach Huaisang about mundane sect matters. A smile would begin to creep on his face, only for it to be dashed when he remembered stitches in his brother's neck, his murderer smiling and pretending to care. Familiar rage would well up inside him, only for that to be pushed down when he saw the boy tending to his mother's every need with painful diligence, supporting her on the horse she'd been leant for the journey, or the sight of them conversing and laughing together in hushed tones.

This was a Meng Yao Huaisang had never seen before. This was Meng Yao the son, who still had the comfort of the one person who had never once shunned him or thrown him away. This was a Meng Yao who was not yet suffering from the festering wound her passing would bring. Huaisang could only hope by removing them from the brothel they had avoided that particular hurt.

As they rounded a bend in the road, the enormous stone gateway to the Unclean Realm came into view and he heard a gasp. He turned and saw starry-eyed amazement in the eyes of the mother and son, and it was this innocent wonder that finally gave him the courage to leave his brother's side and guide his horse over to talk with them.

“What do you think?” he asked cheerily.

Meng Yao startled and his expression shuttered with a carefully guarded smile. “It’s incredible Young Master.”

Meng Shi was still staring up at the gates as she said, “I’ve never seen anything so large.” She smiled at Huaisang. “Do all sects live in places like this Young Master?”

Huaisang pouted. “No, the most of the other sects have much more beautiful homes. Ours is like this because we have more monsters in the area, so it needs to be fortified. It’s so dull.”

“Well I think it’s wonderful,” said Meng Shi, still beaming.

The horns began to bellow, heralding the return of the Sect Leader. A cool wind swept up as the gates began to creak open, and so Huaisang almost didn’t hear Meng Yao say, “May I ask a question Young Master?”

Huaisang glanced down at the boy and nodded. Meng Yao was silent for a moment before asking, “How exactly... did you convince Sect Leader Nie to take us in? In the street, when

we met, he seemed... less than enthused by the prospect, and he hasn't spoken a word to either of us since we left Yunping."

Huaisang frowned, suspicion rearing in his chest. Was he trying to see if he could exploit his brother's compassion?

"I'm worried that he feels put upon with us here."

Huaisang raised his eyebrows as Meng Shi murmured, "A-Yao..."

Huaisang managed to muster up some light-heartedness as he replied, "My brother is very strict and has a bad temper, but he knows the difference between right and wrong, with no nuance in between. He knew that he could help you, so he did." He looked down and met Meng-Yao's still uncertain gaze. "Be honest and work hard, and you will have no quarrels with my brother."

Huaisang didn't know why he was surprised when they fell into a routine. Things always managed to fall into a routine in Qinghe.

His brother was no less forgiving in terms of his training, which was disheartening. He had forgotten how much he loathed the endless, dull repetitions of sabre formations, and living life once already didn't make it any easier.

However, his existence was made a little lighter by the presence of his new tutor.

It had taken Mingjue all of two days to realise the wasted extent of Meng Shi's intelligence, and he had been quick to test her learnedness and put her to work dictating over Huaisang's studies. Her teaching method was gentle but firm, and instead of disregarding Huaisang's protests that he already knew one topic, she would merely ask him to prove it and then move onto the next topic with a smile. After an adolescence of his brother's harsh teachings and then the pressures and expectations that came with being a sect leader, he had forgotten what it was like to have someone who was understanding of his misgivings. He couldn't remember if he'd ever known someone like Meng Shi.

Flitting around them all like a foraging bird was Meng Yao. Within a week of starting his training he had managed to form the wisp of a golden core, and had thrown himself into training with single minded focus. Once it had solidified into something more stable, he had allowed himself to be diverted by other tasks, and he was soon ensconced amongst the menial tasks of the sect. He often took on the burden of the jobs of other disciples, polishing blades, running robes back and forth from the laundry maids, or fetching water from the river. And even though he never commented, Huaisang could tell Mingjue was impressed whenever he witnessed the boy's work.

Huaisang watched him with veiled suspicion. He couldn't help but wonder what the boy's motive was, what he was trying to wheedle out of them. He remembered the man from his previous life with the crafted smiles, doing everything and anything to claw his way into the favour of those around them. He couldn't help but worry that the cycle was just repeating in a different way.

However, he didn't realise his worries were so obvious.

"I feel like you wish to be spending time with my son rather than me."

He startled from the window he had been staring out of, watching Meng Yao organise the practise blades on the racks in the yard. He glanced across the table at Meng Shi, who had an amused smile on her face. He smiled sheepishly then said, "I'm sorry, I just..." He swallowed and decided to risk her favour. "Madam Meng, do you think your son wants power?"

Meng Shi frowned. "What do you mean?"

Huaisang shifted in his seat. "I heard a story the other day about a young man in much the same position as your son. He had been kicked while he was down, but he didn't let that distract him from his goal of recognition and power. He clawed his way to the top through hard work, but also through lying and cheating and killing. He even killed and betrayed those closest to him, who loved him. It was like his dreams blinded him. And in the end it was for nothing. He was found out and disgraced, and then he died a shamed man." Huaisang sighed, slumping forward over the desk. "I'm sorry, but I can't help but think of that story when I look at Meng Yao. Do you... Do you think he is capable of something like that?"

In the silence that followed he risked glancing at Meng Shi, expecting offense and anger. Instead he saw her staring out the window pensively, biting her lip.

Eventually she let out a soft breath, then coughed a few times behind her sleeve before saying, "I think so, yes. My son is a pleaser. It's the only way he's been able to survive. And..." She looked down at her hands. "The absence of his father has hurt him more than he'd ever say. He is smart and talented, and he wants a father's recognition and love for those things. He wants *everyone* to recognise him for those things." She smiled at him. "But for all his ambition, my son can be kind and loyal and generous beyond belief. And Young Master Nie, you have given me the perfect opportunity to thank you for taking us in when you did, because had you not, I am afraid those qualities may have eroded in him."

When she tried to bow Huaisang waved his hands frantically. "Oh no no, please, there's no need for that. Thank you for answering my questions."

He looked out the window again just in time to see Meng Yao leave the training yard. He smiled a little. His worries weren't entirely banished, but at least they had abated.

Meng Yao had learnt long ago that to avoid beatings and beratement one had to work hard. He had never experienced the luxury of being praised for his birth, like other high born boys his age experienced, and he knew it was unlikely he would ever experience it, no matter how exalted his father was. However, he had at least hoped by working diligently and consistently, he could garner some form of praise.

And yet, after only a few weeks in the Unclean Realm this was starting to seem impossible as well.

No matter how hard he worked, no matter how much of his own time he sacrificed, he seemed to be invisible to his superiors. Instead there were just the same insults, the same jabs from his so-called peers when the masters' backs were turned, and Sect Leader Nie rarely ever spoke to him, or even noticed him. He tried to ignore it, but his rage was an oily, cloying thing that he couldn't scrub out, no matter how hard he tried. He had thought coming to the Unclean Realm would change things, but it was becoming more and more apparent he had been too hopeful.

Then he overheard them.

It was early evening and he was walking past the training yard when he heard the familiar voice of his most persistent tormentor, a newly promoted captain with a head too big for his shoulders. "It was no trouble at all, master. I just thought the weapons racks need some reorganising."

Meng Yao froze as older training master replied, "Well done. I will be sure to let the Sect Leader know of your efforts."

Meng Yao stood still, resisting the urge to leap out and scream at them, until he heard chuckles and the captain and his two lackeys rounded the corner and spotted him. They glared at each other for a moment before the captain sneered, "You have something to say?"

Meng Yao pursed his lips. "I don't think it's seemly for a cultivator of your standing to be taking credit for the achievements of others."

"Oh? And who's to say they're not my achievements?" The captain smirked. "It's better if they are, anyway. Your bloodline taints our sect, and we don't want Sect Leader Nie's name to be besmirched by his private whore thinking he's better than he is." A nasty glint came into his eyes. "Speaking of whores, is your mother in her rooms? We were thinking of paying her a visit soon. We shouldn't have to pay, right? Given she's generously been offered a place to stay, she might as well-."

He never got to finish as Meng Yao lunged forward, his nails gouging lines down the captain's cheek. The captain shouted and the next thing Meng Yao knew he was on the ground and they were kicking him, driving the air from his lungs, pain flaring over his body...

"Hey!"

The beating suddenly stopped and Meng Yao managed to lift his head to see Nie Huaisang striding towards them, looking more livid than any almost-fourteen year old should. "What's going on here?"

"Young Master," said the captain, bowing. "This trash was speaking poorly of the Sect Lead-."

"Shut up," snapped Huaisang, pushing through them to crouch beside Meng Yao. "Are you alright?"

Meng Yao coughed and nodded. There was something cold in the boy's eyes that unsettled him, and he didn't envy the captain as Huaisang turned to him and said, "Go away. If I ever find out any of you have been attacking this man again, you will regret ever having entered the Unclean Realm."

"Young Master-."

"All it takes is for me to cut myself and tell my brother you were being rough with me. Do you really want to find out what would happen to you then?"

The men looked genuinely terrified for a second, and then scuttled away. Nie Huaisang turned back to Meng Yao and said, "Has that been happening a lot?"

Meng Yao coughed again and let the boy help him to his feet, affecting his best placid mask. "That's the first beating, Young Master. You shouldn't let it trouble you. I am sorry for being an inconvenience."

Nie Huaisang watched him closely then said, "Why don't I show you how to get some good revenge?"

Meng Yao blinked. "Sorry?"

The Young Master grinned. "You just seemed a little murderous, so I thought I'd lend a hand giving you an outlet for some of that. Because trust me, the violent route is often more trouble than it's worth. Come with me."

If Nie Huaisang had in fact picked the lock to the captain's room and he and Meng Yao had switched out some of the documents in his report that night, no one had to know. And if the two of them were in an optimal position to hear the Sect Leader's bellow of rage and see the captain thrown from the Sect Leader's office, scrabbling around on the ground desperately to collect the rather lewd illustrations that had been slipped in amongst his report, it was purely a coincidence.

Nie Mingjue had a headache.

The irritating afflictions had become more and more frequent recently with the heightened tensions between the sects, particularly the damned Wen dogs strutting around and committing all sorts of atrocities like they were gods in the heavens. Given the increased number of headaches, the maids had decided to just show him where to find the right herbs to dissipate them in the storage rooms underground, so Mingjue helped himself whenever he needed them.

He was heading down to the storage units after a training session, his mood soured, when he found the door to the room he needed open, a lantern lit inside. Frowning he walked to the doorway and stopped, peering inside.

Meng Yao stood in front of the herb stocks, a notebook in one hand and a piece of sharpened charcoal in the other. As Mingjue watched, he began counting the boxes to himself quietly,

before making a note in his book. He then started tracing his finger down the page, mouthing the words and numbers, and Mingjue refused to dwell on the little fluttery pit that formed in his stomach as his eyes passed over the movement and the cute furrow that appeared between the boy's brows.

Meng Yao turned around and promptly startled when he saw Mingjue standing in the door. He hastily arranged himself into a bow and greeted, "Sect Leader Nie. How may this Meng Yao help you?"

"No need. I'm here for herbs," said Mingjue, not liking the awkwardness that stole over him. He almost felt as though had been caught doing something he shouldn't have, though he knew he was innocent of any crime. He stepped into the room and asked, "What are you doing?"

Confusingly, Meng Yao flushed and stuttered, "Oh well, I was just taking an inventory of what we have in storage here. As tensions with the Wens are rising, I thought it would be best to make sure we have enough in case of... rationing." His gaze swept the floor. "Forgive me if Sect Leader thinks I could be spending my time better..."

"Let me see your numbers," said Mingjue, holding out a hand. With a reticent expression Meng Yao handed over the book and Mingjue scanned the pages. His brow furrowed as his gaze passed over page upon page of meticulous, organised calculations, with little notes scrawled in the margins theorising better ways to organise stock and channel funds.

However, something else made him pause. These notes looked suspiciously like the ones he'd received from one of his captains relating to their weapons cache. Notes signed under his captain's name, that he had praised said captain for.

"These are all yours?" asked Mingjue, brandishing the book. Meng Yao furrowed his brow and nodded. "And did you do the weapons cache last week?"

Meng Yao looked startled and said, "Y-Yes, Sect Leader. I thought I gave it to-."

"He said it was his work," said Mingjue bluntly.

A myriad of expression flashed across Meng Yao's face, betrayal, resignation, and finally the briefest flash of rage that mirrored Mingjue's own before his face shuttered. "I see."

Mingjue took a deep breath struggling with his own anger in order to say, "Your work had been invaluable, and I deeply appreciate it. I will punish the rat that decided to steal your credit. Harshly." He handed the notebook back as Meng Yao looked up, as if incredulous that Mingjue believed him. "I don't stand for liars Meng Yao. And keep up this work. It will be essential in the months to come."

Meng Yao looked stunned for a moment, and that was how Mingjue left him after grabbing his herbs, making a path straight for the bastard who thought he could steal credit.

Weeks turned into months, then turned into a year. Meng Yao proved himself time and time again as a dedicated member of the sect, both in his exceeding results in administration and his focus on his cultivation. Mingjue had mentioned picking up the sabre, but Meng Yao had been satisfied and more suited with his own thinner blade. After some consideration, Mingjue was inclined to agree.

It was after yet another flawless report landed on his desk and a sweet, a bashful smile had been the response for his praise, and the sunlight had caught against dark hair and pale skin in a way that made him inclined to write poetry, that Mingjue said, “Become my deputy.”

Meng Yao’s eyes had blown as wide as dinner plates, struck dumb. Mingjue cleared his throat in the awkward silence that followed and continued, “You have proven yourself to be more than capable, and you have a patience and a mind for mundane matters that I simply don’t. Furthermore, I believe that once others start witnessing your talent in a more public space, you will garner the respect you deserve.”

Meng Yao had looked surprised, then a little guilty. Mingjue let it slide. He knew the young man had been trying to hide the small abuses he suffered at the hands of others, but by frequenting the training fields Mingjue always heard more gossip than most. He didn’t seem like the type to listen, only to shut down such talk, but people always had a habit of underestimating how astute he was.

Finally, Meng Yao saluted and murmured, “This Meng Yao humbly accepts your offer, Sect Leader.”

It was subtle but Mingjue could recognise the overjoyed light in his eyes, and it offered a sense of satisfaction for himself. That night at dinner Huaisang casually mentioned Meng Shi had been coughing a lot.

They fell into an easy routine. Meng Yao kept the paperwork from Mingjue’s desk so Mingjue could focus on training the troops. With the Wen Sect growing evermore arrogant training seemed more important than ever. Qinghe had never run so efficiently. Somewhere along the line Mingjue realised they had become friends. And he would swear upon every god he knew that friendship was the only reason he desired the boy’s presence.

Huaisang watched as this developed and tried to let go of his misgivings. It became easier by the day, as Meng Yao relaxed and opened up and Mingjue softened under his influence. And yet he could never let his guard down. The past (the future?) had taught him that no matter how soft and contented and kind Meng Yao could appear, he could always want more. And so as he sat with the ever patient Meng Shi, half feeling a sense of obligation to her, he decided that he could be friends with Meng Yao, but he would never trust him.

Meng Yao was noticing a phenomena.

Ever since he had become the Sect Leader’s deputy, he was often in charge of fetching meals and returning the dishes to the kitchen. But every time he performed this duty, he was

noticing more green left on the plate than not.

A few weeks after his promotion, he was clearing the Sect Leader's table and noticed yet another pushed aside piled of sauced greens, and couldn't help but asked, "Is the Sect Leader not fond of vegetables?"

Nie Mingjue's head snapped towards him and, amusingly, he flushed. "No I- It's not-." He waved his hand dismissively. "Leafy vegetables are too bitter for my taste, and the kitchens always put too much of them on my plate."

Meng Yao managed to not chuckle. "I've heard bitter greens are good for you Sect Leader."

"Well they certainly don't taste good!" Nie Mingjue burst out. Meng Yao bit his lip and continued to clear the table, willing to acquiesce. However, the Sect Leader obviously had other ideas. "What are you smirking about?"

Meng Yao glanced at him, smiling placidly. "Was I smirking? My apologies Sect Leader, it was most unintentional."

The Sect Leader narrowed his eyes, suspicious without animosity. "Come on, out with it. What did I say that was so amusing?"

Meng Yao pondered for a moment, wondering if it was wise to voice his thoughts, and decided to throw caution to the wind. "Oh it was nothing. I just remember that I felt the same way when I was a child."

It took Nie Mingjue a moment to catch on. "When you were a-?! I am your Sect Leader!"

Meng Yao nodded. "Of course Sect Leader. And you are fussy about your greens. I'm sure that's nothing to be ashamed about."

Nie Mingjue was turning a very interesting pink colour. "Don't you have sums to be checking?"

Meng Yao allowed himself to laugh, and tried not to get distracted at how the Sect Leader's jaw slackened when he did. "Indeed I do Sect Leader. Have a good night. I will see you tomorrow."

If he lingered a moment too long when he met the Sect Leader's gaze, no one had to know.

A few months later, Huaisang was told he would be sent to the Cloud Recesses.

His brother was cruelly deaf to his pleas for mercy and leniency, whilst Meng Yao and Meng Shi were sympathetic. He determined his new mission would be to have his name changed to Meng Huaisang.

"It's just not *fair*!" Huaisang whined to Meng Shi during one of their tutoring sessions in the library. "Da-ge doesn't even think to ask me about whether I want to go or not, and he wouldn't care even if he did listen to me!"

“Young Master, it sounds to me that you must make the best of a bad situation,” said Meng Shi, her eyes not leaving the text they were working through. “I’m sure you can find something good in the Cloud Recesses.”

“No. It is a silly place full of boring people,” pouted Huaisang.

Meng Shi smiled, looking thoughtful before she said, leaning forward conspiratorially, “Well then, why don’t we play a game?” Huaisang perked up, giving her a quizzical look. “I’ve been doing some reading, and I found out the Cloud Recesses have hundreds of rather ridiculous rules, yes?”

“Thousands more like it.”

“Well how about this. Don’t do anything too major, but see how many rules you can break in your time there without anyone noticing.”

Huaisang gave her a surprised look, then a grin spread slowly across his face. “Madam Meng, how incredibly unprofessional of you!”

Meng Shi sat up a little straighter and gave him a knowing smile, “I don’t mean to brag Young Master, but I am somewhat of an expert in the field of keeping incredibly smart young men entertained.”

Huaisang tilted his head, his smile softening a little. “I wish you’d met my mother. From what I’ve heard, I think she would have liked you.”

“Ah, perhaps, but I doubt your father-.”

She cut off as a deep hacking cough suddenly wracked her slight frame. One cough quickly turned into a fit and Huaisang reached out and patted her on the back as she leaned away, worried by the rattle sounding in her chest. After a moment, Meng Shi breathed deeply and sat up again, flushed and tears in her eyes. She produced a cloth from her sleeve, dabbing at her face as she said, “Deepest apologies Young Master. I don’t know what came over me there.”

“Perhaps you should see the physician?” said Huaisang cautiously.

“I wouldn’t want to trouble them. It’s perfectly fine Young Master, I’m sure it’s just the weather. My constitution always takes a terrible turn around this time of year.”

Huaisang was still sulking when Meng Yao escorted him to his new prison. His brother’s aid kept glancing at him, and kept a firm hand on his arm after one failed escaped attempt into the forest.

“Don’t be too disheartened, Young Master,” said Meng Yao as the Gusu mountains came into view and Huaisang started dragging his feet. “This will be a wonderful learning opportunity for you, and if I am not too bold, I think it will be good for you to escape your brother’s... rigorous expectations.”

“From one person’s expectations to the next,” groaned Huaisang. “Meng Yao, you don’t understand how exceedingly dull the Cloud Recesses are. You aren’t allowed to have *any* fun and if you break any of their stupid rules they make you copy them or they beat you! It is highly unfair and I don’t want to go.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive Young Master,” said Meng Yao, at least having the decency to appear sympathetic. Huaisang had forgotten how good it felt to have a sympathetic party to complain to and to talk about his hobbies with. Yet another thread in the convoluted web that was his feelings towards Meng Yao.

They walked for another two hours before they were being admitted into the tranquil graveyard that was the Cloud Recesses. The moment the greeting hall came into view Huaisang was immediately distracted from grumbling about being trapped here and realised he’d made a terrible oversight. For none other than Lan Xichen was standing at the door to greet them.

If there was one thing he regretted in his revenge upon Jin Guangyao it was his treatment of Lan Xichen, an already injured man whose only crime had been to be too trusting and to love too dearly. Seeing the smiling figure in white at the top of the stairs, guilt clawed at his heart. In his old life he had never been able to face this man, and seeing him now, when nothing had happened, was somehow worse than the crushing despair that had driven him into seclusion.

“Huaisang,” greeted Xichen, and Huaisang managed to muster up a smile and a bow. “I’m glad you’re here. Was your journey troublesome?”

“Not at all,” said Huaisang, annoyed that his voice was trembling. “You didn’t have to come to greet me Xichen-ge.”

“It was no trouble at all, and I promised Mingjue-xiong I would keep an eye on you,” replied Xichen, still smiling that innocent, warm smile that Huaisang had to avert his eyes from. He almost winced at the concern in Xichen’s voice as he asked, “Huaisang, are you feeling alright? You seem shaken.”

Huaisang laughed and said, “It’s alright Xichen-ge, I think I’m just tired. It was a long journey.”

“Of course. I’ll take you to your room shortly.” Xichen turned to Meng Yao, curious. “Forgive me, but do you happen to be Meng Yao?”

Meng Yao looked surprised and bowed deeply. “I am, Zewu-Jun. It is a pleasure to meet you and I am honoured you know of me.”

Xichen smiled and said gently, “Please, such formalities are unnecessary. Mingjue-xiong has mentioned you in his letters, and says nothing but good things.” He glanced at Huaisang. “I hope that the next time I come to Qinghe we can speak more, but for now I must make sure Huaisang settles in.”

“I understand. I thank you for your kindness.”

Huaisang glanced at Meng Yao and saw the same adoring light in his eyes that everyone had when they met Lan Xichen. He remembered the two of them together, the happiness they brought each other when everything was better, and he almost felt regret that he could not allow that to flourish. Things were still too uncertain, and he didn't want Lan Xichen to suffer as he did in the previous time, lonely and slowly being eroded away by grief and guilt.

Huaisang took a deep breath and smiled at Meng Yao, saying, "Are you sure you can't sneak me home? I can hide in your room, da-ge would never know!"

Meng Yao chuckled and bowed, saying softly, "Goodbye Young Master. I will see you next summer."

With that he abandoned Huaisang to his fate.

His time at the Cloud Recesses was much of the same, except this time he had a sympathetic pen pal in Meng Shi back home. He reignited his friendship with Wei Wuxian and Jiang Cheng, suddenly remembering how much fun he had with them and how cute Jiang Cheng's butt was. He briefly considered pursuing the other man this time, but then decided to just let things play out. Though he did think long and hard about possible routes for making sure the brothers' story turned out better. With Meng Yao safely in Qinghe, he hoped it could be.

Inevitably, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji collided and Huaisang prepared himself for years of pointless, oblivious pining. And just as inevitably Wei Wuxian was expelled from the Cloud Recesses. Huaisang and Jiang Cheng continued on, though this time Huaisang made more of an effort to solidify the friendship. And if, after many many cups of shared illicit Emperor's Smile, they possibly made out... well, what Lan Qiren didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

It seemed like a shorter period to the end of his lectures this time, and before he knew it he was bidding farewell to Xichen at the gates of the Cloud Recesses. He almost turned to start his journey, but the looming threat of war was casting a very long shadow. He turned back towards the older cultivator and said firmly, "Xichen-ge... if something ever happens here, go to my family's ancestral tombs. You'll be safe there until da-ge and I can come and get you."

Xichen looked surprised, but Huaisang didn't give him the opportunity to ask questions, turning on his heel and hurrying to join his entourage.

A year and a half later the Sunshot Campaign began.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the world of the Frakenchapters. This one and the next have been spliced and diced with each other so much recently, I am surprised they are coherent. Also, sorry it's just kind of a bunch of short scenes spliced together, this is more of a building

block chapter more than anything. As always, thank you for reading, and thanks for all the lovely comments!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, this chapter contains all the nastiness in the tags. Take care reading!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Xichen followed his advice and their army was formed. Huaisang couldn't help but feel secretly proud.

Mingjue returned to his tent after rinsing the grime of battle off his body in the river to find Meng Yao organising the intel documents they had gathered into something resembling a filing system. They had been hastily abandoned earlier in the day when the lookouts had spotted the Wen dogs approaching. He turned when he heard the tent flap fall back into place, giving Mingjue a look at the impressive black eye the young man was sporting and the cut above his left eyebrow.

Meng Yao smiled warmly and bowed as Mingjue approached, saying softly, "Congratulations on your victory Sect Leader Nie."

Mingjue made a derisive noise. "Hardly a victory. All we did was defend territory we'd already seized. No progress."

Meng Yao's smile was gentle when it came. "Hardly a victory, and yet the Wens have also made no progress and the men are celebrating." Mingjue frowned at him and he took a step closer. "It will be good for morale Sect Leader. Including your own. Let yourself be a little triumphant."

Mingjue stared at him, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards slightly as something hummed in his chest. His eyes flickered briefly from large amber eyes to his deputy's lips, plush and red, and whilst he hated this lack of self discipline, for that moment he wondered if it would be such a bad thing to lean down and capture those lips with his own, to celebrate his victory how and with who he wanted...

Then a voice called from outside the tent, "Deputy Meng?"

The spell was broken and they jerked away from each other. Mingjue told himself he didn't mourn the string that had snapped, pulling them towards each other, as Meng Yao called, "Yes, what is it?"

"A message for you from Qinghe."

Mingjue and Meng Yao shared a look before Meng Yao open the tent flap to reveal the messenger. The man bowed to Mingjue, then handed a scroll to Meng Yao and departed. Meng Yao frowned at the scrawled writing on the outside of the parchment as he turned back into the tent and murmured, “It’s from Young Master Nie.”

Mingjue snorted as his deputy open the scroll. “Typical. Spends more time writing to my deputy than me.”

He watched as Meng Yao’s eyes scanned the page and his own heart clenched as he watched the colour drain from his face. Once he was finished he looked up at Mingjue, eyes wide and afraid, and said in a shaking voice, “My mother...”

He seemed to choke then, swallowing heavily. Mingjue let him recover before prompting, “What’s happened?”

“My mother has become very ill,” Meng Yao said quietly, as though the world were falling down around him. “Young Master Nie says... it does not look like she will recover.”

“Go,” said Mingjue firmly, aching for the boy.

Meng Yao’s eyes widened and he said quickly, “Sect Leader, I am needed in the campaign, I am your deputy-.”

“She is your mother,” said Mingjue, firmer still. “You should be with her at the end. Trust me, it stays with you forever if you’re not there. You can come to join me again when you’re ready.”

He still remembered the day his own mother had died of the epidemic that had swept Qinghe. He had only been five years old, kept away from her sick room out of fears of infection, but he had convinced himself that had he been in that room with her he would have been able to beat away the monster that was sapping her life. Even though he had grown out of such childish beliefs, the regret had never left him.

“Thank you Sect Leader,” said Meng Yao, bowing deeply. “I am indebted to you.”

“You’re not,” said Mingjue. “Now go. If you linger you may not have time to help her.” Meng Yao looked surprised and Mingjue nodded. “If there’s anyone who can find a way for her to recover, it’s you.”

Meng Yao gave him a brief smile then dipped his head. “Thank you Sect Leader. I will return to you as soon as I am able.”

With that he was gone, leaving the tent feeling colder than before.

Huaisang sat by Meng Shi’s bed and tried not to cry. The woman lay on her back, eyes closed and breathing shallow, her skin pale and covered by a thin sheen of sweat. The physician worked quietly in the background, mixing herbs to help her sleep. No matter what he or any of the other doctors Huaisang had called had done, nothing seemed to be able to alleviate the

rattling cough or ease the fever that ravaged the woman's body. It was only a matter of time now, they said.

Huaisang buried his face in his hands, and all he could see was his brother collapsing in front of him, half mad with a qi deviation. He thought by removing Meng Shi and her son from their dire circumstances he could avoid this outcome. Meng Shi was the vital piece to avoiding it. He hadn't considered that the illness itself was inevitable, already creeping through her veins and decaying her lungs. He also hadn't considered that by taking this route, Meng Yao would no longer be the only one distressed by her passing.

The sound of fast footsteps made him look up just as Meng Yao burst into the room. His step didn't falter as he rushed over to the bed, his face growing pale and still as he did so. At the look of horror on his face, Huaisang felt irrational guilt knot in his stomach. He couldn't find any words, so he just let Meng Yao grieve for a moment.

"You are her son?" asked the physician after a while.

Meng Yao turned and nodded, asking tonelessly, "What is afflicting her?"

The physician sighed and replied, "I don't know. Whatever the illness is, it is attacking her lungs, and she is not responding to any treatments." He gave Meng Shi's prone form a sombre look. "Perhaps if she had a Golden Core it would not have gotten so bad but... I'm afraid diseases such as this claim the lives of common people every day."

"I know," breathed Meng Yao, kneeling to take his mother's hand.

Huaisang stared at him before saying softly, "I'm so sorry. I wish I had seen how badly this was affecting her..."

"It's not your fault Young Master," murmured Meng Yao, a distant look in his eye as he stared at his mother. "She is very good at hiding things."

The empty tone in voice scared Huaisang. It reminded him of dark things. He leaned forward a little and said cautiously, "We're not going to give up. And we're going to make her as comfortable as possible. And... And I'll do anything to make this easier for you, okay?"

Meng Yao gave him a smile that didn't reach his eyes and that scared Huaisang more than anything. It belied desperation. "That is very kind Young Master. I am most grateful."

Huaisang rose slowly, murmuring, "I'll give you a moment alone."

Meng Yao nodded and Huaisang headed for the door, glancing back at the forlorn figure at the bedside once more. He couldn't let this happen again, but he didn't know if fate was on his side.

It was only half a surprise when the physician ran to him three days later saying both Mungs were gone. For the first time in decades, Huaisang closed his eyes and prayed to the gods for good fortune. Perhaps they hadn't abandoned him here.

When Nie Mingjue heard of Meng Yao and Meng Shi's disappearance from the Unclean Realm he tried not to worry. He hoped Meng Yao was bringing her to him for help, to consult with him on what to do next. But days turned into weeks with no word, and it became harder and harder for Mingjue to keep his attention on the campaign.

Then, one night when he was trying to clear his head by pacing the bank of the river they were camped by, he heard the whispers. Two of his men, gathering water by the stream, unaware of his presence as they gossiped.

“That’s a pretty harsh punishment for just wanting some medical help.”

“What do you expect? Showing up during Young Master Jin’s birthday celebrations? Of course Jin Guangshan would react harshly. Can you imagine what Madam Jin would have done to him if one of his bastards had shown up, with his sick mother of all things!” The man’s tone was laughing.

“I don’t understand why the kid’s trying so hard. She’s a whore, whores die all the time. He should have abandoned her when Young Master Nie took him in.”

“If you ask me the Young Master should have left him on the street. Scum like that only stains the sect.”

Mingjue had heard enough and came stomping out of the reeds, taking out his distress by screaming at them and threatening them with a discipline paddle.

After that he threw himself into the campaign once more, waiting for any sign or rumour. There was nothing of Meng Yao and Meng Shi, only talk of strange happenings near the Jiang encampment involving altered talismans and demonic cultivation. And then talk of similar things started leaking in from Qishan.

Huaisang read the letter proclaiming Wei Wuxian’s rather impressive return with vague bemusement. He had been so busy searching for the Mengs he had completely forgotten about those events. He made a note to himself to visit the Jiangs and try to smooth some things over before it all went pear-shaped.

He had been missing Meng Shi terribly in particular. He longed for her gentle guidance and kind ear during these times.

Then, as it was his duty to read all correspondence to Qinghe in his brother’s absence, he turned to the rest of the letters. He was in the middle of frowning at one detailing the potential presence of demonic cultivation in Qishan when he heard fast footsteps and a messenger suddenly burst into the room, out of breath and wide eyed with panic.

“Young Master Nie!” exclaimed the man, remembering to bow. “Young Master Nie, ill tidings!”

Huaisang sat up straighter, thinking of veiled smiles and sharpened strings. “What is it?”

The man looked at him, desperate. “Sect Leader Nie has been captured!”

Everything turned to ice.

Huaisang was pacing. Again. He had been pacing so much that he was half worried he would give his advisors a mental breakdown, but if he stopped moving he was worried his thoughts would consume him.

“There has to be some way to get inside,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

The haggard looking man standing before the Sect Leader’s seat replied tiredly, “Young Master, I’m sorry, but there is no way. Wen Ruohan has only become more and more paranoid as the Campaign drags on. The Fire Palace has turned away or executed any new servants out of fear of spies.”

Huaisang let out a long breath. “Then we attack head on. Rally the other clans, utilise Wei Wuxian, and use *deception*, now that my brother’s morals aren’t in the way.”

“Morale is low, Young Master, I don’t know if now is the right time. Furthermore, there have been more reports of increasing levels of demonic cultivation in Qishan, especially around the Fire Palace....”

“I don’t care!” yelled Huaisang. He gathered himself in the stunned silence that followed before saying more calmly, “Everything will fall apart if we don’t move now. I’ll write to Xichen-ge. He’ll be able to call everyone to action.”

It was times like this that Huaisang regretted not showing his hand a little more, so he could have some authority and draw some respect from the other clans and his own. As it was, all he had to go on was the sympathy a worried little brother could garner, and in a war as vicious as this one, that wasn’t a lot.

Suddenly the doors to the hall opened a crack and another servant peered inside. “Apologies Young Master. There is someone here to see you.”

“I am in the midst of a war council. They will have to wait,” said Huaisang curtly.

The man grimaced before saying, “I’m sorry Young Master, but... I believe you will want to see her.”

Huaisang frowned and the man stood, admitting a woman in plain brown robes. Huaisang’s eyes widened.

Meng Shi smiled at him before bowing and saying, “Apologies for the interruption Young Master Nie, but I needed to speak with you urgently.”

Huaisang was moving before his mind could catch up to what was happening. He flew across the room and crashed into Meng Shi, engulfing her in a tight hug. She let out a little gasp and he buried his face in her shoulder, surrounded by the scent that had somehow come to mean safety for him.

“I thought you were gone,” he whispered.

A hand came up to stroke his hair and she murmured, “It’s alright Young Master. I’m here now.”

That’s when he felt it. A shimmer running off her, a presence that even his paltry spiritual awareness could detect.

He stood back, eyes wide, and said, “You… You have…”

A pained expression crossed her face as she said, “It is about this that I need to speak with you Young Master.”

Confusion was drowned out by a wave of horrible clarity. Wen Ruohan’s ceaseless seeking of power. The miraculous development of a Golden Core. Demonic Cultivation at the Fire Palace even though Wei Wuxian was still in Yunmeng and Xue Yang wouldn’t be making his appearance for many more years.

“Oh no,” he whispered.

The cold water dumped over his head left Mingjue gasping. Beside him he could hear his men’s cries as they were given the same treatment. He tried to turn to see them, but his arms and legs had been chained tightly to the ceiling and floor, restricting his movement. His muscles were aching and he could feel his fingers going numb from the tightness of the chains.

He heard footsteps and looked forward. Rage coloured his vision red as he laid eyes on the red and white robes and red brown eyes.

Wen Ruohan chuckled and said, “If this is the pathetic dog my son was killed by, then the boy wasn’t much use to me after all.”

“You scum!” bellowed Mingjue, straining against his bonds.

Wen Ruohan regarded him coldly before saying, “I should cut your tongue out and send it to the rebels. That should be enough to douse their pitiful little flame, knowing their commander has died in agony and humiliation.”

“They will never-!”

Wen Ruohan struck him and pain blossomed across Mingjue’s cheeks as pointed nails opened his flesh. The man stared at him unblinking, then said softly, “I really need to do something about that mouth of yours…”

He turned around and walked over to the wooden table behind him. Leisurely, as if selecting something to read, he started picking up cruel looking metal tools, holding them up one by one as if to show them to Mingjue. Mingjue could hear his men’s stuttering breaths and feel their fear gathering, but his wouldn’t give the Wen dog the satisfaction of his fear. And he hoped his defiance would keep the monster’s attention on him.

Eventually Wen Ruohan turned back to Mingjue with a pair of metal pliers in his hands. Mingjue tensed as the man approached, a smile curling his lips as he said, “Open up.”

Mingjue clenched his teeth, but Wen Ruohan simply seized his jaw and wrenched it open. Almost gently he inserted the pliers and clamped them around one of Mingjue’s molars. Mingjue braced himself, the monster smiled... and then the door opened.

Fury twisted Wen Ruohan’s expression as he snarled, “I thought I said I did not wish to be disturbed.”

“Deepest apologies Sect Leader, but this is a matter that cannot wait.”

Ice shot through Mingjue’s veins at the sound of the familiar voice. The Wen dog withdrew the pliers and let go of his jaw, allowing him to look towards the voice, a frantic hope in him wishing he had heard wrong.

Meng Yao stood by the implement table, his eyes trained on Wen Ruohan. Mingjue stared at him, too shocked to feel angry at first, but that didn’t last long. Rage began to build, white hot and screaming.

“Forgive me Sect Leader, but out scouts have reported the united forces of Gusu Lan, Yunmeng Jiang and Lanling Jin are on their way here. They’ve broken through the primary defences, and will arrive at the Fire Palace in two hours,” said Meng Yao.

Wen Ruohan made a derisive noise and said, “Then stop them with your fierce corpses. This should not be a problem for you.”

Meng Yao paused before saying, “Wei Wuxian is with them too, Sect Leader.”

Wen Ruohan was silent for a moment before taking a deliberate step forward and cupping Meng Yao’s jaw and running a thumb along his lower lip. “Then kill him and take the Stygian Tiger Amulet. After all, I trained you to be a demonic cultivator for situations such as this, and I doubt you would wish to disappoint me, would you?”

A sharpened talon dug into the corner of Meng Yao’s mouth, but Mingjue barely noticed. All he could feel was rage as he shouted, “Traitor!” Both men turned to him, both blank faced. His rage swelled and blurred his vision. “How could you abandon us? How could you abandon the righteous path? You traitorous *scum!*”

Meng Yao remained impassive as Wen Ruohan smiled and said, “Are you going to allow him to speak to you like that, pet?”

Meng Yao stared at Mingjue for a long time before raising his gaze to the Wen dog again and saying, “Of course not.”

The air thickened, the smell of iron becoming overpowering. Shadows began rising around Meng Yao, gathering in his outstretched palms and his eyes flashed red. Resentful energy radiated off him in overwhelming waves and it took all of Mingjue’s willpower not to buckle

under the pressure of it. He had never felt something so concentrated outside of his family's crypts. He hadn't thought it was possible to control. It couldn't be.

His former deputy suddenly threw the shadows forward, and two balls sailed passed Mingjue and he heard his men scream. Rage surged through him and his muscles screamed as he pulled against his chains, but he was helpless to do anything but listen to his men thrash and their muffled distress. Then everything was still, and his men's spiritual energy faded.

"No!" Mingjue screamed. He felt his qi begin to roil but he didn't care. All he could see was the filthy traitor watching him with those unbearably cold eyes. "How could you! We took you in! You ungrateful son of a *whore*! I should have left you in that brothel to rot!"

Wen Ruohan laughed and said, "I think you've made the beast quite mad with your treachery pet." He slipped a long dagger from his belt and handed it, hilt first, to Meng Yao. "I think you should be the one to do the honours. It will be poetic."

Meng Yao took the dagger, and something fierce and angry came into his eyes. The resentful energy began to stir again, catching at his skin. Mingjue glared at the traitor, breath hissing through his teeth. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing him look away from his death.

Then, without a flicker of his expression, without a sound, without any warning at all, Meng Yao spun around and plunged the dagger into Wen Ruohan's heart.

The Wen tyrant's eyes bulged, he coughed, then he crumpled to the floor, dead before his head cracked against the ground.

Metal clattered against stone as Meng Yao dropped the dagger. He turned back to Mingjue, and now his face was nothing but shock and panic. His eyes widened a little and he gestured slightly, and black ribbons of resentful energy sliced through Mingjue's bonds. And that's where the traitor made his mistake.

Mingjue exploded forward, a heavy fist cracking against Meng Yao's cheek bone and sending him hurtling to the ground. Mingjue was on him a second later, wrapping his hands around his throat. There was no time for blades, all he did was squeeze and squeeze as the traitor tried to thrash, left scratches down his arms, choked, went still...

There was a cough behind him.

Mingjue stopped and turned around. His stomach dropped as he saw his men slowly picking themselves off the ground, blinking around blearily. One of them saw him and said, voice trembling, "Sect Leader?"

Mingjue let go of Meng Yao and looked down. His former deputy lay sprawled underneath him, hair caught in his mouth, blood trickling from between his lips, eyes half closed, completely still. The world went white around Mingjue as he whispered, "No."

The Cloud Recesses was permeated by an unshakeable calm. Even after the destruction of the Wen attack, the ruins had seemed immovable, as if they were meant to be that way. It was as if the cultivation and purity of its people had seeped into the very stone and wood of their home.

Mingjue felt like a bolt of lightning shattering that calm as he paced the paths of the gardens. He tried to stay out of the way of the disciples, or rather, they stayed out of his way, but he couldn't help but feel like he was interrupting something sacred. He hadn't been specifically told to stay away from the medical hall, but the unfriendly thrum of the wards seemed designed to keep outsiders away as well as keeping the prisoner in.

"Da-ge."

Mingjue jerked away from the stone lantern he'd been glaring at to see Xichen standing in the path a few feet away. He smiled tiredly, walking over to stand at Mingjue's shoulder. "The poor thing is going to crack in two if you glare any harder da-ge."

"I'm sorry," Mingjue muttered. "How... How is he?"

Xichen shrugged, the sympathy in his eyes worse than accusation. "Improving by the day. He is very resilient. After everything he's been through, I am shocked by his continued optimism. I can see why you took him as your deputy." He smiled. "Huaisang is visiting now, but he said he would like to see you afterwards."

Mingjue stiffened, guilt gnawing at him, then nodded. "Very well, if he wishes to see me then I will go. But... let him know he has no obligation to see me if he does not want to."

Xichen nodded sadly before saying, "Da-ge, we must also talk about the future. His, as well as the cultivation world's." Mingjue frowned at him and Xichen grimaced. "The day before you arrived, Sect Leader Jin came to visit him. Meng Yao says he offered him a place at Koi Tower, and to accept him as his son."

Mingjue's stomach dropped, though he knew he had no right to the dread he was feeling. "That is... good. I am glad to know he has a place in his family. And a prominent place at that. I presume he took the offer?"

"No, actually," replied Xichen, surprising Mingjue. "He asked for a few days to think on the issue. And da-ge... I do not believe that would be a wise path for him to take."

"Why? He will have a family and a position in a prominent clan."

"It is no secret that Jin Guanshan wishes to fill the vacuum Wen Ruohan left behind. And I fear that his motivation behind this sudden generosity towards Meng Yao is less to do with his achievements in the war, and more to do with his newfound... abilities."

A cold pit formed in Mingjue's chest. He was trying not to think about the dark path Meng Yao had walked down. Whenever he did he felt angry and guilty, furious at the boy for turning to the tainted path rather than exploring other options, and angry at himself for not helping him more. He knew, as everyone kept telling him, that he was too busy with the

campaign to focus too much on such private affairs, but if he couldn't even keep his own deputy away from Wen Ruohan's poison, then what was the point of fighting the war at all?

"What does your uncle say?" he asked eventually, jaw clenched.

Xichen sighed. "My uncle... well, I can't say he is pleased by the situation. He wishes to keep Meng Yao confined until he returns to the righteous path, but I doubt Meng Yao will agree to that. He does not have a Golden Core anymore. If he steps away from Demonic Cultivation, he has nothing. The same goes for Young Master Wei, but he has the protection of the Jiang Sect."

There was another stab of guilt, but Mingjue managed to brush it away. "They cannot keep him locked up forever."

Xichen let out a sad smile. "You would be surprised what the elders of my clan can do when they are united."

Mingjue frowned and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You are not a powerless child anymore, and..." He paused, his turmoil suddenly resolving itself. "Should you wish to campaign for Meng Yao's freedom, I will support you."

Xichen smiled at him, then said softly, "Well then da-ge, I believe it is time for you to see him."

In his previous life, Huaisang hadn't been involved much in the recovery from the Sunshot Campaign. He hadn't been much involved in any part of the Campaign truthfully. This time around he could only describe his role as damage control, particularly when it came to preventing Jin Guangshan from seizing power, which was much easier now that the old lecher didn't have Meng Yao working for him behind the scenes.

His first course of action was to seek out the Wen remnants and immediately start kicking up a fuss about their treatment at the hands of the Jin cultivators, a much easier task once he discovered Meng Yao had been secretly untangling the ties Wen Qing and her people had to Wen Ruohan, allowing her the freedom to set up a unit that tended to civilian casualties throughout the campaign. It was much easier to garner sympathy and support for their plight now that they had been actively protecting and helping the innocent on both sides of the conflict. His commotion over the issue quickly got Wei Wuxian on his side with Lan Wangji following after, looking as though the Demonic Cultivator had hung the stars in the sky. The Jiang siblings quickly followed, and by extension, Jin Zixuan got involved. Lan Xichen had been too preoccupied to pay much attention to Huaisang's actions, as had Mingjue, which brought Huaisang to his second bout of damage control.

He arrived at Meng Yao's room in the Cloud Recesses just as Meng Shi was stepping out of it. She smiled tiredly and bowed to him, saying, "Hello Young Master. How are you?"

"I am fine." He nodded at the door. "How is he?"

"Recovering," came the simple answer.

Huaisang's face crumpled as he said, "I- I am so sorry for my brother's actions. I don't know why..."

Meng Shi sighed and said, "My son has decided to forgive Sect Leader Nie, so I shall trust his judgement and do the same. However..." She smiled, a glint in her eyes. "Sect Leader or not, I will be having a stern word with him soon."

"I am glad I am not my brother then," he said with a laugh.

Meng Shi smiled and stepped aside, allowing him access to the room. "Go on. I'm sure he wants to see you."

Huaisang nodded, nerves making his hands tremble as he moved past her and stepped into the room.

It was a bare set up inside, with only a table, a bed and a chair as furnishings. There were no books or writing utensils, and this coupled with the oppressive weight of the spiritual suppression seals made it very clear that this was more of a prison than a healing room.

Meng Yao sat by the window, staring out the small crack through the bars and paper into the garden beyond, his chin propped on his hand. There was a distant look in his eyes, but Huaisang's relief was indescribable when he noticed it lacked the reptilian coldness he had gained in their previous life. And then there were the marks.

Some of the bruises and scars Huaisang could see were identical to the ones Meng Yao had gained before. However, Huaisang's eyes were continuously drawn to the bruises on his throat, and he could only feel guilt at the contradictory feeling of relief and pride they conjured. For those bruises represented a change. They represented the vanquishing of his brother's anger, of the mercy this new Meng Yao possessed, of the shining hope that lay in the future. They represented Huaisang's success. And when Meng Yao turned to him and offered a tired but genuine smile, Huaisang returned it with equal warmth, rushing forward to take Meng Yao's hands in his own as he let Jin Guangyao go.

Nie Mingjue was not a coward. Far from it. He was just not what one would call emotionally adept. As such, even though he had received permission, it took Mingjue another full day to steel himself and march himself to the door of the healing room. After that it took another ten minutes or so to pluck up the courage to knock. He heard the soft admission, and entered, quickly shutting the door behind himself as if to prevent immediately bolting out again.

Meng Yao sat at the table in the centre of the room, his spine ramrod straight, a pot of tea by his right wrist. He was dressed in a plain white robe that made the bruises and cuts on his skin stand out, his eyes wide and cautious as he stared at Mingjue, his lips parted slightly as he breathed softly and evenly. He looked tired and drawn, his hair more lank than Mingjue remembered and dark circles under his eyes. There was a strength in his amber eyes that hadn't been there before, and Mingjue suddenly realised the bruises and cuts were the evidence of this new steel being forged. His eyes drifted to the dark markings at the boy's throat, and he pursed his lips. He wanted no part of this forging, but he had already dug that grave.

Meng Yao smiled at him softly, the expression not quite reaching his eyes. “Sect Leader Nie, please sit down. I will serve you some tea.”

Mingjue swallowed at the hoarse rasp to in Meng Yao’s voice, but he complied, sitting down heavily across the table from him. His former deputy set about pouring out two cups of tea, his movements ginger and pointedly avoiding meeting Mingjue’s gaze. Once they each had a cup, an awkward silence wrapped around them both like a shawl.

Finally, Meng Yao took a sip of his tea and asked, “If I may Sect Leader, I would like to know about the state of affairs between the sects. My carers are rather unwilling to... tell me about the outside world.”

Mingjue frowned at him. Xichen had told him that many of the Lan healers were too afraid of being tainted by Demonic Cultivation to do much more than check Meng Yao’s wounds most days, but of course his former deputy would sugar coat the situation. With a sigh Mingjue said, “The Jiang and Lan sects are rebuilding. The Jin Sect and my Qinghe Nie Sect were not as severely effected, so we have become the main financers for the recovery effort.”

Meng Yao looked thoughtful. “What about the Wen Sect remnants?”

Mingjue grunted. “Most of the combatants have been executed. My brother has gotten himself involved in some scuffle with the Jin Sect involving some non combatants. I need to speak with him about it. He shouldn’t be defending those who didn’t lift a finger to stop the Wen tyranny.” Meng Yao sighed heavily and Mingjue frowned sharply. “What?”

“Those are good people Sect Leader Nie,” said Meng Yao softly. “They spent most of the war saving the lives of civilians. On both sides.”

“Some of them were cultivators,” argued Mingjue. “They could have done something.”

Meng Yao shook his head. “Sect Leader, forgive me, but I am too tired to have this conversation right now.”

Mingjue’s temper flared and he wanted to persist for a brief moment, but then he saw the sag in the boy’s shoulders and the crippled look in his eyes, and he let it go. The silence returned, a tension burning between them. Mingjue’s hand clenched into a fist on the table top and he found himself longing for the battlefield. It was so much simpler than this.

Finally he could take it no longer and asked, “Why did you turn to Wen Ruohan?”

Meng Yao stared into his teacup, unblinking. “I didn’t.”

“Yes, you-!” Mingjue started angrily, but reeled in his temper and his voice once more when he saw Meng Yao flinch. He took a deep breath and growled, “I know you were never loyal to him. But there were other ways for you to save her.”

Meng Yao smiled without mirth. “Your Qinghe Nie Sect had run out of options, and was already too stretched by the war to be distracted. The Jiang and Lan Sects were gone. And when I went to the Jin Sect I was turned away with a cracked rib and black eye for my

efforts.” The smile became more bitter. “Unfortunately Sect Leader Nie, I had no other options. The Wen Sect was the only sect that was willing and able to do what was necessary to save my mother.”

“By mutilating your spiritual energy!” Mingjue exploded, slamming his cup down. “By launching you onto the impure path! You have done nothing but betray yourself by straying from the righteous path!”

Meng Yao’s gaze was icy as he replied, “It seems that whenever I try to walk the righteous path, men more powerful than I see it as a reason to hurt me.”

Shock pierced Mingjue’s heart like a blade, and his eyes flickered to the yellowing bruises once more. Meng Yao looked somewhat remorseful at his words, but he offered no apology. They sat staring at each other for a long moment, neither looking away.

Then Mingjue dipped his head.

Meng Yao sucked in a startled gasp. “Sect Leader-.”

“For the injuries and distress I have caused you, I apologise,” murmured Mingjue. “I let my rage get the best of me before I bothered to learn the truth.”

Meng Yao paused before saying, “Please do not bow to me Sect Leader, I am unworthy. And I do not blame you for your actions. I had to make my attack seem as realistic as possible, so I understand your rage.”

“That doesn’t make what I did any less wrong.” Some of the tension lifted, and Meng Yao managed to give him a genuine smile. Mingjue felt something warm bloom in his chest at the sight and asked, “What will you do now?”

Meng Yao looked away. “I don’t know. My fath- Sect Leader Jin has offered me a place at Koi Tower, and the name Jin Guangyao.”

The name was vaguely familiar to Mingjue, inciting unease. But more than that, pain he had no right to shoot through his chest as he asked, “Are you going to take his offer?”

Meng Yao was silent for a moment before saying, “I don’t know yet. Part of me wants to. I know my mother is still hopeful that we can both be recognised by him. I must admit, a small part of *me* is still hopeful that this gesture is genuine, that he truly had seen my worth as his son.” His expression hardened. “I am no fool though. He wants a Demonic Cultivator now that the Jiangs have one. He had no need of another son.” He laughed, bitter. “The Jins want to use me, the Lans and Nies wish to make sure I never see the light of day again.”

“I don’t!” Mingjue said sharply, leaning forward.

It was as if he hadn’t spoken as Meng Yao continued to stare listlessly at the floor. “Perhaps I should just disappear. Take my mother and go beg Baoshan Sanren to take us in. No one would mourn our absence anyway.”

“That’s not true!” Mingjue burst out, slamming his hand against the table and making Meng Yao flinch. “Huaisang cares! Xichen cares!” His voice faltered. “I care!” Meng Yao’s gaze lifted, incredulous, hopeful, pained. Mingjue hesitated before saying, almost on impulse. “Come back to Qinghe with me. Be my deputy again. Things were always better with you around. You can’t waste your talents by vanishing into obscurity. And I... I want you by my side again. I know I have no right to, after what I did, but this is the truth of my feelings.”

Meng Yao’s expression was blank as he stared at Mingjue, before he said, “I am a Demonic Cultivator now, Sect Leader. As you say, I have strayed from the righteous path. Are you sure you want someone like that by your side?”

Mingjue averted his gaze and muttered, “We can find ways to overcome our differences. I have never been totally resistant to... compromise.”

The mask shattered with the surprise that flashed across Meng Yao’s face. It was schooled a moment later, but there was a softer light in his eyes as he said quietly, “I will consider Sect Leader Nie’s offer.”

It was the best Mingjue could hope for.

Sharp. That was the best way Meng Yao could describe the man sitting across from him.

Everything about Jin Guangshan was sharp, from his clothes, to his features, to his tongue, to the light in his eyes. He was like a cat considering the mouse caught under his paw, unmoved by its cries of terror, prolonging the fear of the inevitable. Right now Meng Yao couldn’t decide if he was a mouse or not.

“You would give up the lustre of the Jin name, a powerful position, wealth and prosperity, to live in the mountains with a bunch of cultureless brutes with nothing but the name of a prostitute?” the Sect Leader said now, his tone like ice.

Meng Yao hesitated, then nodded. “The Nie Sect has the right Cultivation methods to help me control the-.”

“Ungrateful whore.”

Meng Yao was surprised despite himself. He stared at his father, whose expression was growing darker by the second, and tried, “Sect Leader-.”

“I offer you something that any other lowly piece of scum would kill to have,” said his father, rising slowly, and Meng Yao stood with him. “I offer you power and security, and you throw it back in my face just to win your place back in that Nie dog’s bed.” Meng Yao’s eyes widened but he couldn’t speak as his father stalked towards him, looming over him. “Like mother, like son, they say. You’re just like her. Arrogant, because you have some learning, thinking that because one Sect Leader has fucked you, you have the same standing as his wife. Tell me, is that what you thought when Wen Ruohan had you under him?”

Rage flared as Meng Yao hissed, “I didn’t-.”

His father seized him by the chin, dragging a thumb slowly over his lower lip. “Listen to me you little slut. When Nie Mingjue tires of you and turns you out into the street, there will be a place for you in the Jin Sect after you have spread your legs for every one of my cultivators that wants you, understand?”

With that he jerked his arm and threw Meng Yao to the floor. Meng Yao didn’t look up as he felt his powers tearing at the seals, screaming to get at the man, to tear him limb from limb...

Then Jin Guangshan strode from the room, slamming the door in his wake. Meng Yao stared at the spot where he had vanished and thought of the look of disgust on the man’s face as Meng Yao begged for Meng Shi’s life. He remembered the pain of every impact with every stair as he fell. He remembered the snickering of the servants, and the cold and lonely and agonising path into Wen Ruohan’s good graces. He determined from this point on to make his father’s life a living hell.

Mingjue, Xichen and Lan Qiren stood together and watched as Meng Yao took his first gulps of outside air for the first time in weeks. Lan Qiren had an even deeper frown than usual on his face as he said, “I am still opposed to this.”

“Uncle, if there is anyone to help Meng Yao back onto the righteous path, it is da-ge,” said Xichen amicably. “He is more than used to dealing with volatile cultivation techniques.”

Lan Qiren sniffed then said to Mingjue, “Take care Sect Leader Nie. This one is clever. He will try to turn you from the correct path.”

With that the man walked away, pointedly ignoring the sombre expression on Meng Yao’s face as he approached them. His eyes lightened though as he turned to Xichen, who said, “This is farewell my friend. It had truly been a pleasure having you here. I will miss our *go* games.” Meng Yao began to kowtow, only to be stopped by Xichen’s gentle hands, which had Mingjue shaking his head. “None of that please. You are my friend, and you are welcome here anytime you wish to visit. And please write to me, if you wish.”

Meng Yao smiled softly. “Zewu-Jun is too kind.”

“Er-ge is fine.”

Meng Yao made a choking noise, eyes wide, and Mingjue rolled his eyes. “You’ll kill him Xichen. Take more care.”

Xichen laughed before sobering a little and saying, “You too da-ge. Both of you. This is a turbulent time and I hope fortune treats you kindly.”

They both nodded before heading down the stairs, ready to take off on Mingjue’s sabre. When it came time for them to come together, Meng Yao hesitated, eyes flicking to Mingjue nervously. Mingjue pushed down the regret twisting in his stomach and held out his hand, saying, “Come. Let’s go home.”

Meng Yao looked surprised, then smiled and took his hand.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a chonker. I mean, it's what happens when you're the fool who tries to fit the whole Sunshot Campaign into 1 chapter.

Also, just to clarify, I do not think a person needs to be abused/experience trauma to be redeemed or grow stronger or anything. Huaisang is just majorly jaded by this point. Thanks again for reading!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The hunt at Phoenix Mountain got off to a rocky start. Meng Yao had sensed the whole ordeal would be somewhat arduous from the moment the Nie Sect and the Jin Sect's arrival coincided and Jin Zixun immediately made the comment, "Sect Leader Nie, are you certain it's good for your image to have the son of a whore at this event?"

Meng Yao's amicable mask hadn't faltered, but Nie Mingjue's face had darkened. Meng Yao had quickly reached out and nudged the Sect Leader, making the tall man frown at him, but he could see his father and Madam Jin standing within earshot, waiting for any show on Nie Mingjue's part to pick apart and disparage.

So instead Meng Yao had smiled and said, "I too don't believe I am worthy for such an honour, Jin Zixun, but I also have faith in my Sect Leader's judgement. I humbly request you do the same."

Jin Zixun had looked annoyed, but had stalked off without another word.

The second incident occurred just before the start of the hunt, once the Jiangs had arrived with Wei Wuxian in tow. Meng Yao had been making his way back to the Nie group from exchanging greetings with Lan Xichen when he overheard some Lan cultivators saying, "Two Demonic Cultivators in attendance? Really, it seems as if the great sects are allowing their morals to completely fall through."

"Rather taints all the pleasantries, doesn't it?" muttered another.

Meng Yao moved on, pretending he hadn't heard and grateful that Nie Mingjue hadn't. His Sect Leader would defend his heritage whenever someone tried to disparage it with ease these days, but his Demonic Cultivation was another matter. It still put a damper on the amicable mood between them whenever it was brought up.

Thankfully, the hunt had gotten underway without further incident, and Meng Yao was now watching with unmasked admiration as Nie Mingjue tore through the last of the swarm of monsters they were dealing with. Once the last one was dead, Meng Yao approached the Sect Leader and said, "Very impressive Sect Leader. Where shall we go to next?"

Nie Mingjue looked troubled, flicking some of the blood off Baxia. "There are too few of them. What's going on here?"

Meng Yao hesitated. He had been hearing the faint sound of flute music ever since Wei Wuxian had disappeared blindfolded into the field, but more than that he could feel the pull and centralisation of the resentful energy in the area. With a sigh, Meng Yao admitted, "I can sense that Young Master Wei is pulling the resentful beings towards his position."

Fury flashed across Nie Mingjue's face. "Dishonourable brat. Has he no shame, using dirty tricks like that?"

Meng Yao paused then said softly, "It is his cultivation path, Sect Leader, I believe he has a right to use it."

"It's a corrupt path," snapped Nie Mingjue.

Meng Yao stared at him, wondering if this man ever thought before he spoke. Apparently not, as discomfort suddenly twisted Nie Mingjue's expression and he seemed rather fascinated with a copse of trees nearby. Meng Yao sighed heavily, then closed his eyes and began to feel the twists and snaps of the resentful energy, gathering it to himself.

Obviously sensing a shift in the air, Nie Mingjue asked quickly, "What are you doing?"

As soon as the words left his lips, Meng Yao sliced through the invisible lures of resentful energy Wei Wuxian had been creating. A second later, he heard a shout of, "RUDE!" echoing down the mountain, and he opened his eyes.

"I'm simply levelling the playing field, Sect Leader."

The Jin Sect was hosting the hunt, so of course the following banquet was overly lavish. Meng Yao entered behind Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang, hoping to blend in with his fellow sect members as they greeted their hosts and took their places between the Jiangs and the Lans. But of course, the minor sect leaders spotted him immediately and didn't even try to hide their whispers and disdain. He ignored them and hoped Nie Mingjue wouldn't notice. He could handle the snide remarks, but he knew the Sect Leader would defend him and worsen his own standing because of it.

But the banquet commenced peacefully, and soon Jin Guangshan was giving his greeting speech. Meng Yao only half listened and never looked directly at his father. He had avoided the man for the entire hunt, and he didn't want to ruin that by attracting attention at the final hurdle.

Finally, the speech ended, everyone downed their first cup of wine, and there was a flurry of movement as everyone went to lift the lids from their bowls. Meng Yao did the same, only to discover there was no food on his plate. He paused, then recovered the bowl and checked the other covered dishes. All of them were empty. Frustration flared in his chest and he couldn't help but glance towards the head table just as his father was looking away, a smirk on his face. He was waiting for the commotion, for Meng Yao to make a fuss, to be ridiculed. Well Meng Yao wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Did his father think this would be the first night he had gone without a meal?

He gratefully accepted more wine from the cultivator next to him and was again glad that Nie Mingjue couldn't see his table. However, before he had even finished pouring his second cup, a soft voice said at his elbow, "Master Meng?"

He turned and was surprised to see Jiang Yanli, kneeling next to him, one of her own plates in her hands. Her smile was warm but knowing as she said, “Forgive me, but I saw that there’s been a mix-up in the kitchens with your plates. Why don’t we save our hosts some embarrassment? Here, have some of mine.”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened and he said quickly, “Lady Jiang, I couldn’t possibly-.”

“It’s fine. It’s far too much for me to eat anyway,” said Jiang Yanli firmly. Meng Yao tried further protestations but she was an unstoppable kindly force, and it was all he could do to stop her from giving him most of her meal. All the while he could feel the Jins burning holes into both of them, and he didn’t want to see the look on his father’s face.

Once she was satisfied with the amount of food on his plate, she said, “I wanted to thank you actually. For your bravery during the Campaign. Without you I have no doubt in my mind that we would still be at war.”

Meng Yao shook his head and said, “I should be thanking you, My Lady. I’ve heard the rumours and I doubt morale would have held out as long as it did without your kind efforts.”

Jiang Yanli laughed, a merry sound that made Meng Yao smile genuinely, and waved him off. Then her expression sobered slightly as she said, “I hope you are alright after that.”

Meng Yao paused. “My Lady?”

Jiang Yanli grimaced and said, “I can only imagine what it would have been like, trapped in a place like the Fire Palace. I hope that you have taken the time to care for your mind afterwards as well.”

It took Meng Yao a moment to remember to speak. Not since he had been reunited with his mother had people asked about anything other than his wounds, or just congratulated him for his great achievement. He had been appreciative of their kind words, and yet no one had seemed interested in him beyond that surface façade.

He suddenly found himself with a new soft place in his heart for Jiang Yanli, so he didn’t bother to put up any visages as he said, “Thank you My Lady. I... I am getting better every day, I think.”

Jiang Yanli nodded, but then they were both distract by the call of, “Shijie!”

There was a flurry of movement and suddenly Wei Wuxian was plopping himself onto the floor next to his sister. “Shijie, you have to go and rescue Jiang Cheng from your stupid peacock.”

They all looked towards the Jiang tables to see Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan having what appeared to be a rather stiff conversation. Meng Yao met his half brother’s gaze briefly before the other looked away quickly, his ears turning pink.

“A-Xian, he’s not my anything,” laughed Jiang Yanli, but there was a warmth in her eyes as she excused herself and went to them.

As soon as they were gone, Wei Wuxian turned to glare at him. “You destroyed all of my arrays today.”

Meng Yao’s pleasant mask went up immediately. “Forgive me Master Wei, but I wanted the Qinghe Nie Sect to go home with at least some of the glory.”

Wei Wuxian rolled his eyes, then asked with faux casualness. “So... how did you managed to tear through my stuff?”

Meng Yao blinked, surprised. “I merely felt the way you were manipulating the energy, then cut through it with my own power.”

Wei Wuxian sat bolt upright and pointed, grey eyes gleaming. “It’s like strings, isn’t it? Or cloth.”

Meng Yao considered for a moment, then admitted, “Yes, remarkably so.”

“Yes! See, I’ve been trying to wrap my head around the form of the energy...”

For a while the two of them discussed their own unique form of cultivation, and Meng Yao had to admit it was very freeing. It was nice to not have constant scrutiny on him for once, and it was good to actually discuss his newfound talents. Furthermore, Wei Wuxian was much smarter than Meng Yao had given him credit for, and despite the near constant stream of chatter, he was good company.

After sometime, a more serious light came into Wei Wuxian’s eyes and he murmured, “You’re very good at that.”

Meng Yao gave him a quizzical look. “Good at what?”

The other man waved a hand in front of his face. “Keeping all this up. Now that I’ve started using the energy, on a good day it takes all my strength not to yell at the people I like over small things. But you can even keep smiling and being polite when people you hate are disrespecting you. How do you do it?”

Meng Yao thought for a moment before replying, “If I allowed myself to be emotionally unstable in Qishan, I was flogged within an inch of my life. Or worse.”

Wei Wuxian grimaced before sighing, “Well, why don’t I introduce you to my coping mechanism?”

With that he flagged down a servant and had more wine delivered to the table. Meng Yao smiled mildly and said, “I shouldn’t, I have to-.”

“I hate most of the people here, and all the other people I like are talking to the people I hate,” interrupted Wei Wuxian, already pouring out the wine. “Therefore, you are my drinking buddy.”

Meng Yao smiled nervously, sensing he wouldn’t be getting out of this easily.

Nie Mingjue hated most banquets, especially vapid, self congratulating ones like this. He understood the importance of banquets after a war victory to booster morale, or at weddings and name celebrations to allow people to relax. But this event was nothing more than a show of Jin self gratification and posturing, and the way way Jin Guangshan was prancing around the place like he was Emperor of the Heavens was grating on Mingjue's nerves.

The night dragged on and on, and soon Xichen's pleasant company was gone as the Lans pleaded their code of morals so they could jump ship and retreat to the safety of the Cloud Recesses. Wanting to avoid more sycophantic sect leaders, Mingjue slipped out the main doors and into the cool night air.

Everything was still and crisp outside, and Mingjue was glad for the solitude. However, it took only a few seconds for him to realise he was not actually alone. Standing a few feet away, looking up at the moon, was a slight figure dressed in Nie robes.

Mingjue frowned as he approached. "Meng Yao?"

His advisor gasped and spun around, strangely unsteady on his feet. Even stranger was the wide grin that spread over his face as he greeted merrily, "Sect Leader Nie! Good to see you! Isn't it a beautiful night?"

He gesticulated wildly at the sky and the lantern-hung gardens. Mingjue's frown deepened as he came to stand next to him. "Uh, yes." He could now see Meng Yao's cheeks were flushed, his hair slightly mussed, and his eyes a bit glassy. "Are you drunk?"

"What? Noooo," said Meng Yao, laughing in a very drunk way. "I've only had... two? Three? Bottles. Wei-di had more. Here, lend me Baxia, I'll fly with it and show I'm not drunk."

Wei-di? Thought Mingjue, half confused, half amused. "That's not a good idea."

Meng Yao's expression suddenly shifted, narrowing his eyes at him. Or rather, at his upper lip. "Sect Leader, you should stop growing facial hair. It makes you look like you have a tiny fish mouth."

Mingjue managed to choke on air. His cheeks heated as he spluttered, self-consciously feeling the hair he hadn't bothered to shave yet, "I- You-! You can't-!"

He stopped when he saw Meng Yao had clapped his hands over his mouth and was staring at Mingjue with wide amber eyes, filled with glee, poorly smothering his giggles. Mingjue's irritation vanished. He couldn't be truly angry at someone as drunk as his advisor.

"Come on," he said gruffly, reaching out to take Meng Yao's arm. "Let's find you some water and put you to bed."

Meng Yao slithered out of reach like an eel, whining, "It's too *hot*. It's a very hot night, too hot for walking."

With that he started trying to remove his clothing. Eyes widening, Mingjue dashed forward and caught him by the arms, saying sternly, "Meng Yao, stop. We're in public."

Meng Yao struggled weakly, eyes half closed as he said, "Ai, da-ge is so mean to me!"

Mingjue froze at the term, sharp heat shooting through him, and Meng Yao suddenly slumped forward against him, burying his face in his robes. Mingjue placed tentative hands on his advisor's shoulders, but before he could disentangle himself, Meng Yao hooked his fingers into his sash and murmured, "You smell like pine. I love that smell. It smells like home. It's what I missed most when I was with him."

Mingjue was frozen, his mind blank. Slowly Meng Yao looked up at him with those knowing eyes, sometimes the colour of tree sap, sometimes the colour of molten gold. His lips were red and glistening as he murmured, "Does the Sect Leader want me to call him da-ge?"

Perhaps he too had had too much to drink, but Mingjue's hands moved unconsciously, one slipping down to the small of his advisor's back, the other cupping his jaw. He leaned down and Meng Yao arched up, as if they were caught in each other's rivers, pulling closer, the heat between them unbearable...

The doors to the hall opened and Mingjue sprang away, the spell broken, Meng Yao staggering. A group of cultivators came stumbling out, well into their cups. They passed the duo without seeing them, and once they were gone Mingjue looked to Meng Yao again. His advisor looked lost, so he reached out and repeated, "Come. I'll get you to your rooms."

Huaisang watched his flustered brother escort Meng Yao back to their overnight quarters, amused. He hadn't expected his brother and Meng Yao's relationship to take this particular turn, but in hindsight, perhaps there was a reason the bitterness between them had run so deep in the other future. Besides, now that Meng Yao had proven himself to be a somewhat trustworthy murderous snake, Huaisang wasn't entirely opposed to the blossoming romance. It would be good for Mingjue to have someone with Meng Yao's political aptitude at his side.

"You're not going with them?" asked a gruff voice behind him.

He turned just as Jiang Cheng came to stand beside him. The Sect Leader looked quite fetching in his formal robes, and there was a slight pink tinge to his cheeks. Huaisang grinned and replied, "Not yet. I'm not done drinking. Why aren't you with your nearest and dearest?"

"Jin Zixuan has already escorted jie to her quarters-."

"Scandalous."

"Shut up. And last I checked, Wei Wuxian was drinking Jin Guangshan under a table somewhere."

As if on cue there was an uproar from the hall and Huaisang heard the sound of Wei Wuxian cackling. He sighed and said, "Oh, it would be such a shame if your brother were to say, ensure Jin Guangshan consumes enough alcohol to kill him, wouldn't it?"

“A real shame,” agreed Jiang Cheng, looking up at the moon.

A comfortable silence fell between them for a few beats, before Huaisang asked, “So, you wouldn’t be missed if the two of us were to go somewhere private-?”

“Yes,” said Jiang Cheng immediately.

Huaisang smiled, linked their arms, and dragged him into the shadows of the garden.

In the morning, as their party was preparing to leave, Huaisang spotted a rather haggard-looking Meng Yao and called loudly, “Beautiful day, isn’t it!”

Meng Yao and half the cultivators around them all winced and looked like they wanted to throw up into the shrubbery.

When working under Wen Ruohan, Meng Yao had learnt the most important skill to have was adaptability. He had never known what lay in store for him when the Sect Leader summoned him. Some days the man was cold and calculating, other days wracked with paranoia, other days consumed with a laughing rage that could only be doused with blood. The worst days were when he was hungry, for it was then that all of his attention would be on Meng Yao, watching his every move, revelling in the fact Meng Yao never knew when he would strike. Amongst all of this, Meng Yao learnt how to mould and contort into versions of himself that pleased those looming over him, and he never made the mistake of thinking any day would be the same, of falling into a routine.

He had forgotten that Qinghe was nothing but routine.

He planned out the budget, he did the clan’s sums, he did whatever administration needed to be done, he had tea with his mother, he tried to eat twice a day, he retired for the evening and told everyone he slept. In reality he was barely sleeping for more than three hours each night, plagued by ceaseless nightmares, and the rest of that time was dedicated to studying the resentful energy that had taken up residence inside of him. He had been forced to bend it to his will so that he could then bend it to Wen Ruohan’s will, but that had been easy when the Fire Palace had been filled with nothing *but* resentful energy, and he only had to use it to hurt people. Now he had to find ways to use it for something good.

Two weeks after the night hunt at Phoenix Mountain he had received a letter from Wei Wuxian quizzing him about Demonic Cultivation and giving him an update on the fight for the Wen remnants’ freedom. Ever since then they had been exchanging letters every three days. It was good to have someone who understood his struggle, someone to talk about ideas he had for the energy, someone who also wanted to demonstrate to the cultivation world that it didn’t have to be a solely evil thing. If he was being honest, he wanted to prove that to Nie Mingjue more than the cultivation world.

And it was in Nie Mingjue that he found his greatest challenge.

Ever since the night hunt, their busy schedules had mostly prevented them from interacting outside of occasional budget and strategy meetings, and Meng Yao couldn't tell if he was grateful for this or not. Any time they were in a room together the air was thick and the silence awkward, and he had a feeling he had said some things whilst drunk that he couldn't remember. The Sect Leader would avoid looking at him until he thought Meng Yao wasn't looking, and if they did happen to lock gazes they would tear away from each other like they had been burned. Any words exchanged were formal and work related, and they worked in separate spaces and never had meals together. All the while Meng Yao felt they were each tied to the end of a guqin string that had been plucked, the vibrations setting them both on edge.

Meng Yao was in two minds about it all.

On the one hand he was relieved. He could not forget the feeling of those hands wrapped around his neck, that raw strength crushing his wind pipe. He had forgiven Nie Mingjue for the action, but he couldn't forget the fear. And moreover it gave him a chance to step back. He had been getting too close to the Sect Leader during the Sunshot Campaign. With the long nights together, the high emotions of the battlefield, the bone deep exhaustion they shared, it was only natural that they would get closer. However, he hadn't realised until he had been alone in his quarters after that first hard week with the Wens, aching for the Sect Leader's steady presence, that he had realised *how* close he had gotten. And he knew in his heart that a Sect Leader could never get too close to the son of a prostitute.

And yet he still ached for it. He missed the Sect Leader's rare warm smiles, the way he frowned when he was puzzling over an administration issue, the way he always ate his meat first at meals, then scowled when eating his vegetables like they had insulted his family name. He missed their friendship. He missed Nie Mingjue.

He said as much during one of his tea breaks with his mother. Despite having a golden core now, Meng Shi refused to cultivate, instead dedicating her time to her new position of tending to the Sect's archives. Nestled amongst the papers she had to file, she smiled at him and said, "It seems to me that you two need to talk some things out."

Meng Yao frowned. "We spoke back in the Cloud Recesses. I just need to move on."

His mother sighed. "From what you told me my love, you haven't spoken enough. Yes, you have addressed some of what happened in the Fire Palace, but not all of it. You haven't told him how you are feeling, and you certainly haven't talked about your new abilities."

Meng Yao shook his head. "Neither of us *want* to talk about that."

His mother sighed and smiled tiredly, but before she could say anything more someone knocked on the door and called, "Excuse me Deputy Meng, Young Master Jin is here to see you."

Meng Yao and his mother exchanged an astonished glance. Nerves gnawed at Meng Yao's heart as they both stood up and he called, "Please, come in."

The door opened and Jin Zixuan entered, looking for all the world that he wanted lightning to strike him dead right there and then. Meng Yao and his mother both kowtowed and he offered a stiff nod to both of them in return. Meng Yao's pleasant mask was already in place when he rose and said, "Young Master Jin, we are honoured by your visit. How may we help you?"

Jin Zixuan struggled for words for a moment, and Meng Yao thought it was rather unfortunate that his brother seemed to express nervousness as irritation. He was now no longer surprised by the rumours he'd heard of the long and troubled courtship between the heir of the Jin Sect and the Young Lady Jiang.

Finally Jin Zixuan's eyes flickered to Meng Shi. She took the hint and dipped her head with a smile, saying, "I will leave you to talk."

She moved carefully from the room, shutting the door quietly behind herself, leaving the two men to stew in the tension. While waiting for Jin Zixuan to talk, Meng Yao took his first opportunity to properly look at his brother. They were unmistakably siblings, their noses and brows were too similar to be otherwise, but they certainly resembled their mothers more. Small blessings, he supposed.

"I, ah..." Jin Zixuan started, his ears turning pink. Meng Yao smiled and waited expectantly. "I never had the chance to talk to you after the campaign. To... To congratulate you on your victory over Wen Ruohan."

Meng Yao raised his eyebrows and said, bowing slightly, "I deserve no such praise. I simply did what needed to be done. The great Sects did most of the work in the campaign."

Jin Zixuan nodded then asked, "My- Our father came to speak with you while you were isolated at the Cloud Recesses, didn't he? About joining our Sect?"

Meng Yao paused then said softly, "He did, thought I don't believe he would appreciate you referring to him as such."

"I don't care. If he's going to continue being unfaithful to my mother, then the least he can do is own up to the results of his infidelity," snapped the other man.

Something went cold in Meng Yao's heart but he kept his expression amicable. However, he was surprised when Jin Zixuan immediately looked regretful and said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... you're not just proof of an infidelity. You- You are a very brave and capable cultivator." He took a step towards Meng Yao, still awkward but something softening in his expression. "I know... I know our father must have been harsh on you. But I... I don't want you to be completely estranged from our family line. So..." He gulped. "I wish to invite you to my wedding in the spring, and I hope you will stay at Koi Tower for a few days prior so we may get to know each other. And please do not be concerned with my parents, you will mostly be spending time with my wi- fiancé and I, and my fiancé's family."

Being rendered speechless in the Fire Palace could be dangerous, so Meng Yao had made sure to train it out of himself. However, he couldn't help but gape in this moment, and he was fairly certain Jin Zixuan wasn't about to whip him senseless for not answering promptly. Eventually he managed to find a smile and his words, concerned that his brother was about to

have a medical emergency from the shade of red he was turning. “May I ask how much of this offer comes from Young Lady Jiang?”

Jin Zixuan looked at little disgruntled, but he replied, “It’s my idea. She just... gave me the courage to go through with it.” He took a breath and gave Meng Yao a look so earnest he wanted to shy away. “I want you to know I didn’t know about your visit to Koi Tower during the Sunshot Campaign, when your mother was ill. I wouldn’t have let father turn you away if I’d known.”

Wouldn’t you? Meng Yao wanted to say, clinging to his suspicion like a shield. He had learnt that it was your only defence in the viper’s pits of the great sects.

“So... will you accept my offer?” asked his brother, fooled by the pleasant mask.

Meng Yao thought for a moment before replying in earnest, “I will most certainly be at the wedding, Young Master, but I will have to check the Sect’s schedule before I commit to attending for longer. Can you please give me a few days to respond?”

Jin Zixuan nodded, stiff and awkward again. “Of course. I look forward to your answer.”

The stood facing each other in cloying silence once more for a few moments, each taking small breaths as if to say something, only to decide against it. Finally, Jin Zixuan nodded again and said, “I will take my leave. Thank you for your time.”

Meng Yao bowed and replied, “Please, no need to thank me Young Master, I was honoured by your request and this chance to speak with you.”

Jin Zixuan looked uncertain for a second, then turned and left the room. Once he was gone, Meng Yao’s shoulders sagged and he let out a breath, glad for the release of tension. However, before he could slump down into a chair at the table, a voice from nearby said, “I hope you’ll take him up on that.”

Meng Yao whirled, pulling the knife he kept in his sleeve and brandishing it. He froze when he saw Nie Huaisang standing between shelves, fan in hand, looking startled. Regret and irritation mingled together (*why* had he been eavesdropping on a *clearly* private exchange?) as Meng Yao quickly sheathed the knife again and said, “Young Master, my deepest apologies. You startled me.”

“I can see that,” said Huaisang, fanning himself as he walked forward. “I’m sorry. I snuck in to get something and I couldn’t help but linger when I heard Young Master Jin. I was afraid he was giving you trouble.”

Meng Yao let out a short laugh. “No trouble, as you heard, just a lot of confusion.”

Huaisang shrugged. “Young Master Jin is a spoiled brat, but he has a good heart once you dig deep enough. And thankfully Young Lady Jiang has committed herself to the excavation.”

Meng Yao chuckled and Huaisang tilted his head like one of his songbirds. “I think you should accept his offer.”

Meng Yao paused, suddenly gripped with that same bitter suspicion that refused to leave him. He thought about Jin Zixuan's earnest expression and Jiang Yanli's kindness and he longed for that warmth, but then he thought of Jin Guangshan's biting words and threats, and that made him remember Wen Ruohan. He remembered being promised a reward for one of his triumphs, raising up over a hundred corpses, but the reward had been nothing but fear and pain as he knew he could do nothing as taloned hands tore his clothes, pressed his face into the mattress...

"We can't let him win Meng Yao."

Meng Yao snapped out of his reverie and looked to Huaisang, surprised when he saw what looked like the exhaustion of a hundred year old man on his face. "If we let that monster and his war taint everything that comes after, we haven't won at all." He reached out, took Meng Yao's hand, and squeezed, steadier than Meng Yao had ever seen him. "I know what happens if we don't block him out of the good parts of our lives. And we get rid of him by embracing the good things without suspicion, okay. We allow ourselves to be happy."

He smiled and let go of Meng Yao's hand, turning and walking out the room, leaving Meng Yao with his thoughts.

"It will be another week until the iron shipments come in from the mines," said Meng Yao as he and the village leader looked over construction site. "Aside from that, everything else should be arriving in the next few days."

"Thank you Advisor Meng," said the man, smiling tiredly. "Your help has been invaluable. I think I would have a riot on my hands if there were any more delays on the materials."

Meng Yao nodded, sympathetic for the man. His village had been raised in a Wen raid, and despite the carnage that took place his people were unwilling to move. The people of Qinghe had ties to their land that went as deep as the roots of the pines the region was famous for.

This village was one of dozens that had been raised during the Sunshot Campaign, and there were dozens more that had been occupied and damaged, their people forced to flee. Now that the people were returning to the ruins, Meng Yao made sure the Nie Sect set aside time to help rebuild. Having lived amongst civilians for most of his life, Meng Yao knew how easy it was for their pains to be overlooked by the grand sects, whose attention was perpetually turned towards the heavens. Even if said cultivators were the ones to cause those pains in the first place.

As Meng Yao looked around at the many house frames springing up around the village and the burnt areas beyond, he said softly, "I am most impressed. I can't imagine your fortitude, to come back here after the destruction."

The man waved him off. "Bah. We've seen worse. You weren't here for the wildfires ten years back. You cultivators have nothing on what the gods can throw at us."

"Meng Yao!"

Meng Yao looked up the hill to see Nie Mingjue standing at the top, a pitchfork in his hands, beckoning him up. Meng Yao excused himself from the leader and hiked up towards Nie Mingjue, smiling as he asked, “Sect Leader, have you decided to take up farming?”

He tried not to smile as he saw the gaggle of village women standing nearby, openly admiring the way the Sect Leader had rolled up his sleeves to his shoulders. There was a lot to admire, and Meng Yao knew any other man would be taking advantage of the admiration. And yet the Sect Leader remained painfully oblivious to the power his upper arms held.

Nie Mingjue grunted and made a sweeping gesture at the large patch of churned soil that was over the crest of the hill and the woman and children working in it. “How much would it cost to ship in the seed for a hundred of these patches? The Wen dogs destroyed all their crops and seed stores, so they’re worried about the winter.”

Meng Yao clicked his tongue. “Cost won’t be a problem, but timing is. With how impacted our supplies were, I doubt we can get seeds in with enough time for them to grow...”

Nie Mingjue frowned. “How are we going to feed everyone then?”

Meng Yao produced the board he had fastened all the papers to with a clip (that the Nie brothers ruthlessly teased him about) and showed the top paper to the Sect Leader. “I am working on a plan that will allow the unaffected areas of Qinghe to produce enough crop to supply the rest of the territory. Given they don’t have to focus on rebuilding their homes, they can apply all their energy to farming.” He smiled. “Also, Huaisang and I have secured a trade deal with Yunmeng.”

“Huaisang has?”

“Yes. He is fairly close with Sect Leader Jiang.”

“Oh.” The Sect Leader narrowed his eyes. “How close?”

“Where’s Baxia?” asked Meng Yao airily, glancing around, only to spot the sabre a few feet away, leaning against an old cart with a straw hat hung on its hilt.

Meng Yao covered his mouth with his hand, smothering a laugh, and Nie Mingjue gave him a glare with no heat behind it. “She’s not a plough, so I decided to put her over there!”

Meng Yao smiled at him. “We were meant to just be overseeing, Sect Leader.”

Nie Mingjue sniffed. “The woman needed help. Her husband was killed in the raid. Besides, it’s good work. I feel invigorated.”

“Ask Baxia if you can borrow her hat and you’ll fit right in.”

“Hush you.”

Meng Yao laughed then took a moment to examine the Sect Leader as he took out proudly over his field. The warm feeling in Meng Yao’s chest gave him the courage to say, “Perhaps the Sect Leader should take up gardening.”

Nie Mingjue frowned at him. “Gardening? Why?”

“It’s a peaceful activity, and your qi is the calmest I’ve felt it since… well, I’ve never felt such calm from you. And before you say anything, it won’t be a waste of time, merely a way to centre yourself.” He looked out over the field as well. “It’s an honourable hobby, really, much the same as cultivating. You’re simply cultivating life rather than power.”

Nie Mingjue was staring at him in a way that made him want to blush. He dipped his head and said, “Merely something to think about Sect Leader. Now, I must continue inventory.”

“Would you help me?” the Sect Leader blurted out. Meng Yao stared at him quizzically, and Nie Mingjue cleared his throat and looked away. “Would you help me start this garden? I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Meng Yao paused then smiled warmly. “Of course.”

With that he turned and made his way back down the hill, trying to ignore the fact his hands were shaking a little. And it felt strange that he was shaking not from fear but something else, something he’d never felt before in his life. He realised there had never been anyone in his life that had been worthy of this feeling before.

Get a grip. You’re not a blushing child, he chastised himself, but for once there was no venom in it. He took a deep breath and began to think about the task at hand, wondering where to go next...

And then a scream split the air.

His gaze snapped up to the edge of the tree line at the bottom of the hill, and he saw two women fleeing the forest. A second later three fierce corpse raced out after them, snarling and locked onto their prey.

Meng Yao flew down the hill, losing his papers in the grass somewhere. He was fast, but the corpses were faster, and he could see the outcome, see the blood and torn flesh, see this already wounded village hurting more-.

His vision went red as resentful energy burst out of him in sharp spider’s legs of malice. They shot past the women, narrowly missing one’s head, and impaled the three corpses, jerking and ripping them to shreds. Meng Yao fell to his knees as he heard the shouts behind him, sucking in huge breaths of air and scrambling to reign in the dark energy. It was pulling against him, a hound on the scent, ready to tear at any living thing nearby, but he knew he couldn’t let it, he was stronger than this, *he refused to be overcome like this...*

Finally he pulled it in and was left gasping in the dirt. He lay still for a moment, coming back to himself, before lifting his head and seeing the two women being helped up by some of the farmers. The next thing he knew there were hands on him and he was being hauled to his feet, and Nie Mingjue’s furious visage filled his vision.

“Are you hurt?” asked the Sect Leader gruffly. Meng Yao shook his head and staggered when he was suddenly released. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Meng Yao blinked. “I had to save them. I acted on instinct.”

“You could have killed them and yourself!” boomed Nie Mingjue. “Your cultivation technique is too dangerous and unstable to be doing things like that!”

Meng Yao felt his rage begin to rise. “I am learning to control it. And the fact that no one was hurt proves that I can.”

“Barely. I was right behind you with Baxia. You could have waited.”

“What’s the point of that when I can *do* something!”

“You used a technique you don’t have proper control over. You were being stupid and showing off.”

Meng Yao went cold. He knew this song. He could only have a person’s trust so long as he met their ideals of who he was. His actual self was never good enough for that. His tone was icy as he said, “If dangerous cultivation techniques are a measure for stupidity, then the entire Nie Sect is full of fools.”

Nie Mingjue looked shocked but Meng Yao had already turned and was stalking away. He heard the Sect Leader call after him, but he refused to look back.

Chapter End Notes

So. We have reached the end of what I have completely pre-written. Big yikes. I have got a big chunk of chapter six done, but I am also going into exam season, so if updates get kinda irregular from here on out, I am very sorry. Hope you enjoyed this one though, and thank you for reading and for all the kudos and lovely comments!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Huaisang was furious. It had all been going so well and then in the span of an hour the harmony they had been building had been shattered.

His brother and Meng Yao had not spoken a word to each other, or even really seen each other since the incident at the village four days earlier. Meng Yao got other Sect members to deliver his reports and calculations and Mingjue would give them a cursory glance before approving them. Mingjue had been in a frightful mood the entire time, losing his temper over small things, retreating into stubborn silences and biting Huaisang's head off if he even dared to *breathe* the wrong way.

Huaisang was at risk of losing his mind at this rate. And he knew the two idiots would be too stubborn to swallow their pride, look at the situation from the other's perspective and *talk* about it. Well, under regular circumstances he knew Meng Yao would probably be willing to do this. But he had a feeling his brother had now committed one slight too many against him for Meng Yao to be the bigger person in this situation, and now those slights were layered with an extra tension that had been building between the two over the past weeks.

But what was worse was the iciness that Meng Shi was beginning to display towards Mingjue. She was always polite towards the Sect Leader, but there was a new curtness to her tone and glint in her eyes that spoke of underlying resentment, and her thinly veiled irritation was beginning to erode her regular demeanour.

Eventually, after yet another mostly silent walk through the gardens with her, Huaisang asked, "Uh... you wouldn't happen to know the details of what has transpired between Meng Yao and my brother, would you?"

"Your brother has once again overlooked everything my son has done for him and focussed on berating him for the one thing he does not like, even though my son is doing everything he can to make sure that one thing benefits the Qinghe Nie Sect," snapped Meng Shi. Huaisang flinched and she looked regretful. "I'm sorry Young Master. I am simply... frustrated, by the repetitive nature of this situation."

Huaisang tilted his head. "Repetitive?"

"Simply put, I am tired of people only treating my son well when he satisfies their needs."

Huaisang was silent for a moment, watching birds hop from bare branch to bare branch in a nearby tree. Eventually he said softly, "I know. I know. I will say something to my brother on the matter."

Meng Shi sighed. "Thank you Young Master. Now all I can hope for is that Young Lady Jiang can offer a similar protection when he goes to Koi Tower."

Huaisang smiled in a way that was more of a grimace. “Ah. He’s decided to go for longer then?”

Meng Shi nodded. “Which is not an avoidance tactic, I’m sure.”

“Not at all.”

And two days later Huaisang was standing by the gates to the Unclean Realm, seeing off Meng Yao as he set off alone for Koi Tower, having refused any guards. As Huaisang watched him, he was once again astounded by how perfect Meng Yao’s pleasant mask was. And yet, Huaisang knew him well enough now to notice the sad flicker of his gaze to the empty hallways around them, and the flash of irritation that followed. But he was all smiles as he fondly bade them both farewell and set off in the crisp afternoon.

Huaisang flicked his fan open and muttered, “Maybe I should have tried to convince him to come with us...”

Meng Shi glanced at him, surprised. “What for?”

“He’s going into the viper pit when he’s vulnerable. I’m worried about what those people will do to him.”

Meng Shi stared at him for a moment before taking his hand and squeezing it. “Well, all we can do now is have faith that he’ll be able to fend them off. And after everything he’s done, I believe A-Yao won’t have any trouble with that.”

She waited until Meng Yao was out of sight before retiring indoors. Huaisang lingered a little longer and was just turning to follow her when he heard fast and heavy footsteps. He raised an eyebrow as Mingjue came skidding into view, a piece of paper clutched in his hand and looking disarrayed. He glanced at Huaisang before his face fell and he said, “Oh. He’s gone.”

“As you can see,” said Huaisang. Mingjue’s face darkened and he crushed the paper in his fist. Huaisang rolled his eyes and said, “Da-ge, we will see him in a week. Try not to brood until then.”

Mingjue’s eyes widened before he snapped, “Watch your tone. And why aren’t you practising your sabre? Get out there or I’ll break your legs!”

Huaisang yelped and scuttled away.

Koi Tower was just as opulent as Meng Yao remembered it being, perhaps more so in the daylight. Sunlight made the gold leafing that decorated the columns shine, and in the soft breeze the peony banners billowed out across the sky. Meng Yao was breathing a little heavier as he reached the top of the many stairs, marvelling that he survived the fall. The Jin Sect had created a façade of the heavens with their wealth, and it was a very long way to the bottom.

Waiting for him at the top of the stairs was Jiang Yanli, smiling warmly as he approached. He smiled back and was about to bow when he paused, noticing the small child, no older than four or five, clutching at her skirts. He was dressed in golden robes, dark haired with large grey eyes, an all too familiar look in them, like an abused dog waiting for the next blow.

“Master Meng, welcome,” said Jiang Yanli, bowing to him.

He did the same and greeted, “Thank you for your hospitality Lady Jiang.” He smiled at the young boy. “And who might this be?”

“Will you say hello?” asked Jiang Yanli kindly, but the boy hid behind her. She smiled, chastising lightly, “Oh A-Yu... this is Mo Xuanyu, Master Meng. He is... He is actually your younger half brother.”

Shock bolt through Meng Yao as his eyes snapped down to the child again. He cleared his throat and said, “I- I wasn’t aware Madam Jin had another child?”

“Ah. He is... not hers.” She smiled at his confusion as he glanced at the child’s robes once again, and she explained, “Sect Leader Jin had an affair with a nobleman’s daughter. She got sick recently and so he decided to take A-Yu in.”

“I see,” said Meng Yao, trying not to let his voice sound flat. If at that moment his father had walked into view, he probably would have beaten him to death. Oh what a coo to have not one but *two* highborn parents. The favours pedigree brought.

“It was done under the agreement that I would care for him,” continued Jiang Yanli, obviously seeing Meng Yao’s anger. He gave her a surprised look. “He’s still young, so I can keep him out of Madam Jin’s way until he is ready to cultivate. And A-Xuan quite likes having a younger brother around.”

Meng Yao nodded, the knot in his chest loosening slightly. “Good practise for when you have your own, no doubt?”

Jiang Yanli blushed but nodded. From there she led him indoors and through the grandiose complex. Servants bowed to her as she passed, and the whispers started as soon as Meng Yao had walked by, though the whispers never had the same sting as they used to. Jiang Yanli took him out into a large garden with sparkling ponds covered with old lotuses, and led him across a series of wooden bridges out onto a pavilion, where there was tea and snacks waiting. All around them were vibrant autumn colours, and having this beautiful view of the red and orange foliage made Meng Yao wish the Nie Sect would put more effort into the appearance of their own estate. Then he remembered the leader of the Qinghe Nie Sect was a stubborn, rigid fool, and he quickly abandoned the thought before he wanted to scream.

All the while Mo Xuanyu watched Meng Yao from behind the safety of Jiang Yanli’s skirts. His gaze followed Meng Yao’s every movement, not with outright fear, but a mixture of caution and curiosity. The caution was too strong for a child so young, let alone a noblewoman’s son, and Meng Yao couldn’t help but wonder what had happened to make him like this. Remembering his childhood, Meng Yao realised he had only been on the brink of

such suspicion at the boy's age, as his mother had done an admirable job of shielding him until he got too wilful.

"I'm sorry A-Xuan wasn't here to greet you," said Jiang Yanli once they were settled. "Or anyone else for that matter. They're at the Qiongqi Path, no doubt having another argument with A-Xian."

"Wei Wuxian?" asked Meng Yao curiously. She nodded and he continued, "Why would he be quarrelling with your fiancé?"

She sighed. "It's not so much my fiancé as my soon to be father and cousin. There are a small group of Wen remnants, I believe you know of them? A-Xian has been struggling to secure their release from the Jin prison camps. That's mainly why I'm here instead of at Lotus Pier. A-Cheng wasn't too happy about the break from tradition."

"Yes, Young Master Nie and I have been doing the same," said Meng Yao, but if he were being honest, it was Nie Huaisang doing most of the work these days. He had been so busy delegating funds and resources to the rebuilding effort that he had mostly forgotten the Wen plight. Guilt twisted in his stomach and he made a note to check in with Nie Huaisang about the situation once he arrived.

He gave Jiang Yanli a pained look. "And Young Master Jin is...?"

"Caught in the middle," came the sad response. "He has his loyalty as a son, but he also does not want to put further strain on his relationship with A-Xian. And... he knows my feelings on the whole situation."

Meng Yao nodded, then smiled. "I am sure it must be trying for him. He respects his father, but I believe he thinks you hung the moon Lady Jiang."

She laughed, flushing as she waved a hand at him. "Oh dear, it seems like I got the charming brother-in-law. You would not believe what poor A-Xuan has had to go through with my brothers."

From what Nie Huaisang had told him, Meng Yao thought he could.

Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli spent the rest of the day together, her showing him the grounds of Koi Tower and him informing her about the state of the cultivation world. Between the wedding and the Qiongqi Path affairs, she had barely had a chance to pay attention to anything else. Mo Xuanyu was a constant shadow stuck to her side, but gradually over the course of the day he began talking to Meng Yao and even offering a little smile every now and then. Despite his earlier jealousy, Meng Yao found himself growing fond of his little brother.

Finally evening had closed in and Jiang Yanli had taken Mo Xuanyu to get his meal. He rarely ate with the rest of the family she had explained in a hushed tone, and Meng Yao felt a pang of sympathy for the boy. He wondered if that was what his existence would have become had he taken his father's offer.

Once Jiang Yanli and Mo Xuanyu had retired inside, Meng Yao continued to wander the gardens, watching the sky turn to deep purple twilight. Stars began to flicker into existence overhead and Meng Yao took a deep breath of fresh air, enjoying the quiet. Koi Tower may have been a viper's pit, but it was still beautiful. He was certain his brother and Jiang Yanli would make that beauty less superficial once they came to power.

After a while Meng Yao felt the first nips of hunger in his belly and decided to head indoors. He wound his way back through the garden and into one of the many lantern-lit walkways, only to round and pillar and come face to face with his father and Madam Jin.

The three of them all froze, shocked. Then Jin Guangshan's jaw tightened and Madam Jin's face darkened.

"What is *that* doing here?" she spat, wrenching her arm away from where it had been linked with her husband's, glaring daggers at him.

"I assure you My Lady, I have no idea," said Jin Guangshan coolly. "If you have come to accept my offer, then you will convince me you have the worse sense of timing in the world."

Meng Yao kowtowed, hating every minute of it, and said, "My apologies, Sect Leader Jin, Madam Jin. I am here as a guest of your son's to his wedding. He and Young Lady Jiang most kindly invited me to come and stay with them for a few days before the ceremony."

Madam Jin made a derisive noise and turned a knife-like look on her husband. "Does no one respect me here? You have long since proven you never have, but now my own son rubs your infidelity in my face. And A-Li too!"

"My Lady-," Jin Guangshan tried weakly.

"And *you*." Madam Jin suddenly rounded on Meng Yao, and he could almost feel the heat of her rage. "You have some nerve coming here, whether they invited you or not. You think because you wear Nie robes and have seduced that fool from Qinghe that you are worthy of our hospitality? Know your place! You are nothing but a common slut, just like your mother!"

Meng Yao managed to keep his expression schooled and the energy in check, but he didn't trust himself to speak, and he felt the air temperature drop by a few degrees. Jin Guangshan seemed to notice too, glancing around hastily, but before things could escalate further there was a shout of, "Mother! Father!"

They all turned to see Jin Zixuan striding down the corridor, a frown furrowing his brow. Meng Yao's shoulders sagged minutely, but he couldn't help but feel guilty as Madam Jin snapped, "Jin Zixuan! Is what he says true? Did you invite him?"

Jin Zixuan stopped in front of his parents and lifted his chin. "I did. A-Li and I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to get to know my brother."

"He is not your brother," growled Madam Jin.

“Oh? Isn’t he? Mother, the last time I checked if you share at least one parent with someone, they are your sibling,” said Jin Zixuan, eyes flashing.

“You have created an uncomfortable situation by inviting him,” said Jin Guangshan coldly.

Jin Zixuan whirled on him and Jin Guangshan flinched. “I think you mean *you* have created an uncomfortable situation by being unable to keep to one bed. And I will not have my siblings abused for your infidelity!” He let out a huff. “Meng Yao will be staying in my wing. Avoid it, and you will avoid him. Now, I wish to retire. If either of you wish to argue further, I will speak to you tomorrow. Come, Meng Yao.”

With that he turned and walked back the way he had come. Meng Yao bowed quickly to the Sect Leader and his wife before hurrying after his brother, jogging a little to catch up. They walked in silence for a way before Jin Zixuan said, voice tense, “I am sorry. I- My mother is always harsh when it comes to my father’s missteps. She does not normally speak that way.”

“I would hope not,” said Meng Yao with a smile, tucking away his resentment. “I understand her anger though. At least I wasn’t kicked down the stairs this time!” His smile dropped when he saw Jin Zixuan stiffen. “I’m sorry. I have put you in an inconvenient position.”

“Don’t apologise, you’ve done nothing wrong,” muttered Jin Zixuan, shaking his head. “I just-. I hate myself for being so blind. I managed to convince myself for so long that it was the women at fault, that they had seduced him. I didn’t give a second thought to my brothers and sisters.” He stopped dead and clenched his fists. “And then I heard him… making advances towards A-Li and I finally realised I had been deluding myself.”

Meng Yao froze. “Father made an advance on Young Lady Jiang?”

Jin Zixuan nodded and said bitterly, “His usual spiel. Trying to be charming. I scared him off. But for the rest of those women it’s too little too late.”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself-.”

“I don’t need to be comforted,” interrupted Jin Zixuan, frowning. His expression softened a little before he said. “I feel guilty. I always will. But I thought that maybe I could do something right by helping these women’s children.” His looked away, his ears turning pink. “And A-Li said I need more friends.”

Meng Yao smiled. “You want to be my friend?”

Jin Zixuan flushed and looked away. “If you want.”

Meng Yao thought for a moment, remembering Nie Huaisang’s words to him a week back, and said, “Well let’s get to know each other better first, and we’ll take things from there.”

Jin Zixuan gave him a small but genuine smile, and Meng Yao felt a weight lift.

Mingjue was in a bad mood. He had been in this mood for a full week. But it was not just a bad mood; it was a terrible mood. Everything irritated him, and he was having trouble finding

joy in anything. Even running sabre drills did nothing to clear the dark clouds hovering over him. And the thing that only stoked his irritation was that at the centre of his foul mood was a maelstrom of feelings he couldn't even begin to decipher.

Sometimes it would make him feel flat, make his tea and food tasteless, make the words on the reports he read blur. Other times, it would continuously replay the banquet at Phoenix Mountain and his fight with Meng Yao in his head, and every time he would feel different. Sometimes he would feel nothing but blinding rage at his advisor's bull headedness, at the disrespect he showed Mingjue and his entire clan. But more often than not now, he would feel something else, something biting and writhing that made his cheeks heat and his stomach turn to bile as he remembered his righteous words. He hated the feelings, and sometimes he hated himself. For which part, he wasn't sure.

And then there was the longing he tried so desperately to ignore. His heart jumped whenever the door to his study opened, only to sink when his was not greeted with a soft smile and amber eyes. He found himself frequenting the supply rooms and the weapons storage, as if looking for something but unwilling to examine what. And at every second there seemed to be an empty space at his side that felt like a dark void. He had felt it back in the Sunshot Campaign. He had hoped to never have to feel it again.

With all of this, he didn't want to admit that he clung to his anger so as to not have his sadness crash down on him.

He sighed as he strode towards the archive rooms, telling himself he needed to look over old financial records and he wasn't just finding an excuse to avoid being alone with his thoughts. However he realised he had made a critical error in judgement when he opened the door to the room and came face to face with Meng Shi.

Mingjue froze in the doorway as Meng Shi looked up and paused. They stared at each other for a moment, Meng Shi's expression shivering, and Mingjue briefly considered turning around and walking out without saying anything. Then Meng Shi kowtowed and greeted softly, "Sect Leader Nie, what can I do for you?"

Mingjue's jaw clenched, telling himself that he was her Sect Leader and he hadn't done anything to incur her ire, not that it would matter if he had. And yet he couldn't help but think of when his mother had been away and he had knocked over one of her favourite vases when he was a child. His father had marched him to her quarters upon her return to apologise and he remembered he had had the same sick feeling in his stomach that he had now.

Composing himself, he cleared his throat and said, "Nothing. I was just wandering."

"I see."

The silence that fell between them was cloying. Mingjue clenched and unclenched his fists while Meng Shi examined a scroll on the table in front of her. However, after a few moments Mingjue couldn't take it and blurted out, "Did Meng Yao speak to you about what happened at the village?"

Meng Shi gave him a guarded look. "He did."

Her tone indicated which side of the argument she stood on. Mingjue frowned and said, “I don’t know how much you know about cultivation, but you have to know that your son’s path is highly dangerous and puts him and others in danger. I understand why he had to stray onto this path, but we fought because I disagree with the fact that he continues to walk it.”

Meng Shi smiled without mirth. “With all due respect, I have read the same about your sect’s cultivation technique Sect Leader.”

Mingjue made a derisive noise. “It’s different. Our cultivation is... volatile, but it remains on the pure path. Demonic cultivation disrespects the dead and utilises the energy we as cultivators seek to purge. And all those who have used this technique have cared for nothing but power. It is a path of evil.”

Meng Shi was quiet for a long time, to the point that Mingjue thought she was giving him a signal to leave. It made his temper flare, but before he could say anything she hobbled towards him, a firm expression on her face. He frowned as she held out her wrist to him, palm up and said, “Please feel my pulse, Sect Leader.”

Mingjue hesitated but complied, laying two fingers against her soft, pale skin, feeling the steady pulse under his fingers.

“Aside from my blood, what else do you feel?” she asked.

Mingjue’s frowned deepened, before he focused. A cool feeling spread through him as he felt the faint but unmistakable thrum of spiritual energy coursing underneath Meng Shi’s skin. After a moment she gently pulled away from him and said, “If you ever begin to only see my son’s cultivation path rather than my son, remember this is the same man who sacrificed everything he’d ever hoped for to save someone he loved.”

Mingjue’s eyes widened as his mind went blank. Meng Shi smiled at him, gentle and caring, and his stomach dropped out. Without another word he turned on his heel and fled, not wanting to accept this new sadness and regret.

The banquet hall was a riot of colour, hung with red curtains and lanterns and filled with sweet smelling incense and the rumble of voices. The tables, cutlery and crockery were all adorned with gold leafing, whilst any smaller fabrics were dyed a deep purple. Servants darted around urgently, making sure no cup with empty and every guest was comfortable.

Meng Yao watched Jin Zixuan, his father and Madam Jin greet guest after guest as a steady stream of cultivators flooded the hall. Most of them were minor sect heads and their wives and children, all dressed in ostentatious finery, whose attempts to say more than a greeting and a congratulations to the hosts were quickly interrupted by the meticulous servants who ushered them to one of the many tables. Whenever someone more important arrived, an attendant would shout it to the rest of the hall and they would be given more time to speak with the family.

Meng Yao was seated amongst the Jiang party’s tables, which were conjoined with the Jin tables. Seated not too far in front of him, Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng greeted the guests from

their own seats, the sister with far more grace than the brother, who already seemed to be impatient with the whole thing. Mo Xuanyu sat directly behind Jiang Yanli, looking for all the world like he wanted the ground to swallow him. Meng Yao was glad to not be drawing attention for once, instead spending his time people watching and admiring his new robes.

He had been flustered when his brother had presented them, having never seen such fine craftsmanship. The were Nie green with fine golden embroidery that formed flowers on the sleeves and the Qinghe Nie beast on the back, and Meng Yao didn't doubt he could probably buy a sizeable estate with them.

"Think of them as a late birthday present," Jin Zixuan had told him, pink-eared, when he tried to protest. "And if that's not enough think of them as my way of catching up on all the ones I've missed."

"Announcing the Gusu Lan party!" called the attendant suddenly.

Meng Yao perked up as he watched the white-clad party enter, his eyes on Lan Xichen as he greeted the Jins and then came to give his congratulations to the Jiangs. Afterwards he looked up, a warm smile breaking out over his face when he saw Meng Yao. Meng Yao rose as Lan Xichen whispered something to Lan Wangji, who seemed to be looking for someone, then came to greet him.

"Meng Yao! It's been far too long," said Lan Xichen as they bowed to each other.

"Sect Leader Lan," said Meng Yao, smiling just as warmly. He and Lan Xichen had exchanged a few letters since his return to Qinghe Nie, but they had both been so busy their correspondence wasn't frequent.

"Er-ge, Meng Yao," laughed Xichen. "There's no need to be so formal." He glanced around, a small frown creasing his brow. "The... The Nie Sect is not here yet?"

Meng Yao smiled. "I came early upon invitation from my brother. They should be here soon."

Lan Xichen's smile took on a worried note, but he merely said, "I see. Well, I am glad you are making connections with your family. Your father...?"

"Only my brother and the Young Lady Jiang," said Meng Yao. "I... I am most appreciative of their kindness. I know I am undeserving."

"Meng Yao, I think you would be surprised how easy it would be to like you," said Lan Xichen gently.

Meng Yao faltered, surprised, but before he could say anything more, a small cluster of sect leaders standing nearby called out, "Sect Leader Lan!"

Lan Xichen glanced towards them, then gave Meng Yao an apologetic smile and excused himself. Meng Yao let him go graciously and went to sit down again only for someone to tap him on the shoulder. He turned and found no one there, then another tap came on his other

shoulder. He looked around and found himself looking at a pouting Wei Wuxian, who said, “Where have you been? I sent you a letter!”

Meng Yao smiled, suddenly light hearted. “My apologies Master Wei-.”

“That’s Wuxian-di to you, you terrible da-ge!”

“Ah.” Meng Yao laughed nervously. “I’m sorry I did not reply. I have been in Lanling for the past week.”

Wei Wuxian made a face. “With the peacock? How could you stand it?” He looked around the hall. “Although, he is honouring my shijie quite well with this. A banquet fit for the Jade Emperor, don’t you think?”

“Indeed.” Meng Yao grinned at him. “After everything his put your sister through, I presume you and Sect Leader Jiang would stand for nothing but the best, yes?”

“You’ve got that right!” Wei Wuxian paused, then grinned, waving across the hall and murmuring, “Ha, Lan Zhan’s seen me. Ah, I’m going to tease him so much! You know, I just can’t help it, but the more someone dislikes me, the more I want to pester them!”

Meng Yao glanced over towards where Lan Wangji was staring at them and raised his eyebrows. He would describe the look the young Lan was giving Wei Wuxian as many things, but hatred was not one of them. “Oh? Are you sure he dislikes you?”

“Of course!” laughed Wei Wuxian, though there was a slight melancholic light in his eyes. “I drove him crazy while I was at the Cloud Recesses, and then I started demonically cultivating, so...”

Meng Yao watched him carefully. He had never asked Wei Wuxian how he turned to demonic cultivation, and he knew now wasn’t the time, but he couldn’t help but remember how relieved he’d felt when Jiang Yanli had reached out to him.

He made a note to ask him later, only to freeze when the attendant suddenly called out, “Announcing the Qinghe Nie party!”

“Why can’t we have parties like this?” whined Huaisang once they had finished exchanging pleasantries with the groom’s family.

Mingjue frowned at his little brother, who was fanning himself with his most elegant red fan and looking around at everything with wide-eyed delight. “This is the wedding of Lanling Jin’s heir, Huaisang. Not every party is so extravagant.”

“You know as well as I that that’s not true.”

Mingjue clicked his tongue, irritated. “Well the Qinghe Nie Sect doesn’t need to show their importance by flaunting their money, Huaisang!”

“Whatever you say, da-ge. Oh look, there’s the Jiang party. Oh, and...”

Mingjue tuned out when his eyes fell on Meng Yao. His breath caught in his throat as he took in his advisor. He had new robes which drew out the colour of his eyes and he looked openly happy. Mingjue had only caught glimpse of that true happiness, and now that he saw it after so long not seeing his advisor, it made his heart ache. It made him want to smile, it made him want to have Meng Yao smiling like that at his side. He was beautiful, and Mingjue wanted to be the one to make him smile like that. It made him think that the amount of grovelling he'd need to do to make that happen would be worth it in the end.

“Come on da-ge, we should greet Young Lady Jiang and A-Cheng,” said Huaisang, snapping him out of his thoughts and tugging him towards the Jiangs.

Mingjue went willingly, feeling slightly dazed. However, as they walk he quickly latched onto something and demanded, “*A-Cheng*?”

Huaisang stiffened a little but said airily, “Oh, did I say that? Oh dear, slip of the tongue.”

Mingjue narrowed his eyes and his suspicions only grew when he saw the bright expression that flashed over Jiang Cheng’s face when he saw Huaisang. However, he then caught sight of Mingjue and did a very poor job at hiding his elation. They exchanged pleasantries with the Sect Leader and his sister, but Mingjue took the earliest opportunity he could, which was Wei Wuxian popping up to complain about something, to excuse himself and approach Meng Yao.

His advisor saw him coming and immediately shuttered his expression, that infuriating painted smile appearing. It made Mingjue either want to grovel or shake it off him.

“Sect Leader Nie,” said Meng Yao, voice light as he kowtowed.

Mingjue nodded and was suddenly lost for words. He had never had a conversation with someone he wanted to continue to have a relationship with after such a large fight. “Meng Yao. You are well?”

Meng Yao nodded. “I have been enjoying my time at Koi Tower. It has been good to get to know my family.”

“Ah.” Mingjue felt like something was trying to claw its way out of his chest. “So- So you will return to Qinghe with us after the ceremony?”

Meng Yao’s face went blank and he was quiet for a second too long. “Probably.”

Mingjue’s mouth went dry, but suddenly Wei Wuxian appeared beside his advisor and slung an arm around Meng Yao’s shoulders. “Yao-ge, I think Jin Zixun is trying to pick a fight with me, you have to- oh, hello Sect Leader Nie.”

It took Mingjue a second to remember to answer, and when he did it was stiff. His eyes flickered over the casual way Wei Wuxian touched his advisor, the casual form of address, and worse still, the relieved light that ignited in Meng Yao’s eyes. A beast woke up inside him, and it was screaming at him to either wring Wei Wuxian’s neck or pull Meng Yao to him

and run his hand through his hair, wrap his arms around his waist, claim, *ravish* those soft pink lips so that everyone knew who he belonged to-.

“I will leave you,” he said curtly, nodding to the two of them. They both bowed in return and he whirled away, his mood darkening as he searched the hall for Xichen. He couldn’t wait to go home.

The evening wore on with much cheer. Meng Yao managed to keep himself secluded amongst the Jiang and Lan cultivators throughout the evening, with Nie Huaisang and a few other Nie cultivators coming over to greet him occasionally. Wei Wuxian was his near constant companion and thankfully his presence was enough to ward off any Jin cultivators that wanted to start trouble. Meng Yao managed to have a good time, though having to keep an eye out for Nie Mingjue put a damper on things. He didn’t want their conflict to cast a shadow over his brother and Jiang Yanli’s evening.

Eventually Wei Wuxian went off to challenge a group of minor cultivators to a drinking contest, and Meng Yao took the opportunity to retreat to the back of the room and have a moment alone. Scanning the room he saw that Nie Huaisang and Sect Leader Jiang had vanished, Jiang Yanli was talking with Madam Jin, and Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen were conversing quietly on the other side of the hall.

Meng Yao realised quite suddenly that he missed his mother. Now that his relationship with the Nies had cooled, he didn’t have anyone he was incredibly close with to talk to. He missed that companionship, and he missed his mother’s comforting presence.

“I thought you’d be over with the brutes?”

Heart sinking Meng Yao turned to see his cousin, Jin Zixun, leaning against a nearby pillar. Even from this distance he could smell the alcohol wafting off the other man’s person. Meng Yao wondered briefly if he thought the cocky smirk he wore was intimidating, or if it was merely a front, for he knew deep down that he looked like a mouldy radish.

“Zixun-xiong,” he greeted, his amicable mask going up. “I hope you are enjoying your evening.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Sect Leader Jin wanted to make sure his son had the best wedding feast money could buy. And given we are Jins, that wasn’t hard.” He gave Meng Yao the same look one would give something unpleasant on the bottom of their shoe. “And you spurned our name like it meant nothing.”

Meng Yao tried not to roll his eyes and replied mildly, “I was most honoured by Sect Leader Jin’s offer, but the Nie Sect’s cultivation knowledge was better suited to my skills. I meant no offense in my decision.”

“Well you offended anyway.” Jin Zixun scowled. “I heard the Nies loathe you. Well, you’re easy to hate, but they think you’re marring their sect. Here you would have had use, and been able to use your corruption to help us, now that Wei Wuxian refuses to hand over the amulet.”

Meng Yao blinked but managed to keep his expression neutral, an idea forming. “Is that so? Yes, it is a powerful artefact isn’t it? Even though I have been working almost every day on trying to replicate it, I haven’t had much success.”

Jin Zixun frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Meng Yao sighed, putting up his best disappointed face. “Young Master Wei and I have been working together on certain demonic cultivation devices. I brought some with me on this trip, but I’ve made no progress on them. Right now they’re just gathering dust in my quarters.”

A sly light was coming into Jin Zixun’s eyes. Meng Yao stared on blankly as his cousin muttered, “I’m getting another drink,” before walking away without properly excusing himself. Meng Yao smiled, and hoped he could count on Jin Zixun’s idiocy and sycophantism to deliver some much needed humiliation to his father’s doorstep.

“Was any of what you just said true?”

Meng Yao froze. As if summoned by his thoughts, he turned to see his father sauntering up to him. Honey brown eyes watched him with cool calculation, and after a moment Meng Yao remembered to bow. “Sect Leader Jin.”

His father sighed, an artificial sound. He folded his hands into his robes and said lightly, “I think now is the time for us to talk.”

Meng Yao’s expression went blank. “Talk, Sect Leader? What is there to talk about?”

Jin Guangshan’s lips curled. “Come now Meng Yao, we are both intelligent people. I think we both know there is *much* for us to talk about.”

Meng Yao’s eyes flickered across the hall. There was no one nearby that he could retreat to.

“Forgive my ill manners during your visit,” said Jin Guangshan, making Meng Yao frown. “And when we last met at the Cloud Recesses. I let my own pain at being rejected by my son draw out my anger, and this time I did not want to upset my wife by conversing with you.”

Meng Yao stared at him, expressionless. “I see. What was it that you needed to speak with me about?”

Jin Guangshan raised an eyebrow. “You have enjoyed your time at Koi Tower, have you not?”

Meng Yao nodded. “I have. Your son and Lady Jiang have been most accomodating.”

“It’s a shame you haven’t been able to bond with them on a more regular basis, no?” Meng Yao was silent and his father smiled. “I’ve heard that you and Nie Mingjue have had something of a falling out.”

It was a struggle for Meng Yao to keep his expression neutral. He made a quick note to scour the troops for information leaks once he got home, but said nonchalantly, “We have had a disagreement. Nothing any other superior and subordinate haven’t faced before.”

“Most subordinates don’t face the constant judgement of their Sect Leader for something they cannot help.” Jin Guangshan shook his head. “Such a shame. I can’t believe he won’t even take into consideration that you saved your mother with your actions. Rather cold, isn’t it?” He frowned. “I don’t understand how you can tolerate being so unappreciated.”

Meng Yao stayed silence, a cold anger growing in his chest. Jin Guangshan leaned forward and murmured, “I want to reiterate, my son... my offer to join the Jin Sect is still open to you. If you want to come and be a family with your brothers and sister-in-law...” He shrugged. “Well, the doors will be open to you. And... you could bring me some information on Nie Mingjue as a gift of gratitude. I assure you, the gifts you receive will be far more illustrious.”

Meng Yao stared at him, not trusting himself to speak. He wanted to carve his father’s silver tongue right out of his head. Did he really think, that after everything, Meng Yao would turn on the Nie Sect so easily?

“Something to think about,” said Jin Guangshan softly, before he sauntered away.

Meng Yao watched him until he was out of sight before leaning back against the wall, letting his anger wash over him. He clenched his fists and breathed deeply, slowly calming down. He missed Qinghe.

“Are you alright?”

Meng Yao jumped and his eyes snapped open. A myriad of emotions shot through his chest when he saw Nie Mingjue standing next to him, a flush to his cheeks and a concerned look in his eyes.

Meng Yao couldn’t decide whether to be relieved or annoyed as he replied, “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Nie Mingjue gestured vaguely to where Jin Guangshan had gone. “He was upsetting you.”

Meng Yao raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And how does Sect Leader Nie know that?”

The Sect Leader waved a hand in front of his face, and Meng Yao realised suddenly that the Sect Leader was quite drunk. “All... this goes still. And your eyes, they become... ah, this is silly, but their colour goes dull.”

Meng Yao was speechless. He hadn’t known Nie Mingjue paid that close attention. The Sect Leader ploughed on, “And your entire body... it reminds me of your mother when I first met her. Your welcoming on a business level, but everything else is shielded. You’ve hidden yourself behind ice.” Nie Mingjue shook his head. “I’m rambling, but I don’t like seeing you like that. I like seeing you with your shields down. It’s like... walking through the dense pines at home, then suddenly breaking out into a clearing.” He gave Meng Yao the most earnest look he had ever received. “You’re like sunlight in a clearing to me. Sunlight through pines.”

Meng Yao gaped as Nie Mingjue flushed an even deeper shade of red. Suddenly Meng Yao found it was quite difficult to remain cross at this drunk, sappy fool, who was so drunk he had begun waxing poetic. That had to be the only reason he was saying these things. Meng Yao refused to let himself hope for any other reason.

However, before he could even mildly jest at the Sect Leader's words, the other man blurted out, "I'mdrunkdon'tlistentome!", and fled. Meng Yao watched him go, a smile creeping across his face, and he held a hand up to his chest where his heart was pounding. Nie Mingjue was drunk, and that was the only reason he said those things. It had to be.

But Meng Yao still felt warm.

"Fuck! Fuck! You're really good at this!" gasped Huaisang, looking down at where Jiang Cheng's head was bobbing over his lap. Shocks of pleasure shivered their way down Huaisang's spine, making his toes curl as the other leader brought him closer and closer to that exhilarating edge...

Then someone began to pound rapidly on the door. They both froze, Huaisang's fingers clutching in Jiang Cheng's dark locks, and his heart sank when he heard his brother call out, "Huaisang, are you there? I need to speak with you!"

"Shit!" Huaisang hissed, a godlike frustration coursing through him as Jiang Cheng pulled off him, eyes as wide as a trapped rabbit. "Quick, hide under the bed!"

Jiang Cheng went without complaint, rolling onto the floor then shimmying sideways out of sight like some sort of weird purple crab. Huaisang would have found it funny if he wasn't so busy making it look like he'd been sleeping and not participating in other bedroom activities. He loved his brother dearly, but they weren't so close as to share this part of their private lives with each other.

Once he was ready he hurried to the door and open it, startled when Mingjue pushed through without invitation. "Da-ge? What's wrong?"

Mingjue didn't answer, instead just pacing at the foot of the bed for a minute. Then he turned sharply to face Huaisang, and in the dim light he could see his brother had that bug-eyed, brittle look on his face he had only seen once before, on Mingjue's first New Years as Sect Leader.

"Huaisang," Mingjue wheezed, "I have made a mistake."

Huaisang closed the door and went to light another lantern to brighten the room a little. "I'm sure the Jins have enough money to fix whatever you broke, da-ge."

"I said something to Meng Yao," gasped Mingjue.

Huaisang froze and turned slowly to face his brother, a thunderous rage ready to burst forth. "Nie Mingjue, if you have picked another fight with him-"

“I sounded like a lovesick poet,” said his brother, surprising Huaisang, clasping his head in his hands and pacing again. “I sounded like a *fool*. I should never have said it. Even if he ever wanted to reconcile before, he certainly won’t now!”

Huaisang tilted his head. “Da-ge, what exactly did you say to him?”

“I don’t know!” said Mingjue in a tone that was bordering on a wail. “Something ridiculous about pines trees and sunlight! I have had too much to drink. I am never drinking again.”

Huaisang smiled and said a silent apology to Jiang Cheng before sitting on the bed. He patted the covers next to him and said, “Sit here da-ge.”

Mingjue still looked troubled but complied. Once he was settled, Huaisang said, “I’m sure a bit of bad lyricism won’t turn Meng Yao off the idea of reconciliation.”

“He’s happier here, I know it,” muttered Mingjue. He suddenly sat up straighter, a gloomy expression stealing over him. “It’s probably for the best. I doubt we could ever be friends again.”

Huaisang rolled his eyes. “Da-ge, you’d been getting along just fine until that fight. I just think you both need to reach a compromise with each other about the demonic cultivation. Be a bit more understanding.”

Mingjue waved a hand at him, scowling. “Even if we could do that, there’s still a problem.”

“What problem?”

Mingjue whirled towards him, pained, making Huaisang reflexively move to catch him in case he doubled over. “These feelings A-Sang! Every time I am around him I am distracted! I worry about whether he’s sleeping enough, or eating well! I want to protect him and see him smile and laugh and be happy! I want to be around him!” He buried his face in his hands again. “It must be the excess amounts of resentful energy around him. It is disrupting my emotions.”

Huaisang stared at him incredulously, wanting to retrieve one of his fans from the nightstand and whack his brother over the head with it. Instead he reached out and laid a hand on Mingjue’s back. “Da-ge... I don’t think it’s the resentful energy doing that.”

“What else could it be?” came the muffled response.

Using his other hand, Huaisang lightly batted Mingjue’s hands away and cupped his jaw, forcing his brother to look at him. “Da-ge, are you entirely certain you are not a little bit in love with Meng Yao?”

Mingjue’s head snapped up towards him and there was an elongated silence as his brother gaped. Eventually he managed to splutter out, “I don’t- That’s not- I couldn’t- That- No!”

Huaisang shrugged, drawing on what little patience he had left. “I think you might be. You want to spend all your time with him, you like his company, you think he’s pretty- don’t deny

it, I've seen how you look at him. And when you fought and he left you spent all your time moping, like a husband who'd had a fight with his beloved wife."

Mingjue stared at him, then looked away, shell shocked. "Oh."

"It's not a bad thing da-ge. You're just scared of emotions." Huaisang laughed. "Also, I think you're well suited for each other, despite everything. And I wouldn't be surprised if Meng Yao reciprocates your affections. You just need to get better at talking to each other."

"Oh," said Mingjue again. Suddenly he frowned and gave Huaisang a suspicious glare. "Your foresight... did you see this when you were younger? Is that why you got me to take them in?"

Huaisang shook his head. "No. I saw a future that was much darker that would have happened if we had left them there. This is a much better outcome, trust me." Huaisang stood up and managed to urge his brother to his feet as well. "Go to bed da-ge. Take some time to think on this. We can talk more in the morning if you need to."

"I- Yes." Huaisang managed to guide his brother out into the corridor before Mingjue wheeled around to stare at him. "You're a good brother Huaisang. I truly appreciate you."

Huaisang let out a laugh that was half amusement and half frustration. "I know da-ge. I love you too."

"I am harsh on you because I care!" Mingjue persisted. "But I don't want you to think that I love you any less because I am strict!"

"I never doubted you for a moment da-ge," sighed Huaisang. "Now go sleep it off. Goodnight."

"Yes, goodnight."

Huaisang watched his brother's unsteady path to his own quarters, making sure he made it safely inside before retreating back into the room once more. He let out a long breath as Jiang Cheng scrambled out from under the bed, saying, "Can you talk to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji? They need help too."

Huaisang laughed and made his way over to Jiang Cheng, wrapping his arms around his waist. Jiang Cheng frowned then said, "Also, foresight?"

"Long story." Huaisang cupped Jiang Cheng's face and drew him into a lingering kiss. When he pulled back he murmured, "And that's not what I want you focussing on right now."

Jiang Cheng nodded, and they tumbled back onto the sheets.

Chapter End Notes

Uuuuugh sorry this is late. Not my favourite of the chapters, but hopefully you all enjoy!
Update schedule's going to be a bit janky from now on cause these chapters are
chonkers. Thank you all so much for reading and commenting and kudosing!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The wedding ceremony was a private event that occurred the day after the banquet. Only family was invited, and Meng Yao had insisted Jin Zixuan not invite him to it. His presence had caused enough problems for the couple as it was, and he didn't want to add Madam Jin's rancour to the already fraught atmosphere between Wei Wuxian and Jin Guangshan. He was more than content to say his congratulations to the couple at the lunch afterwards.

He beamed as he approached his brother and Jiang Yanli, who both smiled back. He bowed to them and said, "Congratulations. I wish you many years of happiness ahead."

"And we thank you for being here. I would have understood if you didn't want to come. You were very brave," said Jiang Yanli. "It's been a pleasure having you with us."

Jin Zixuan nodded in agreement and Meng Yao bowed his head, saying, "Thank you. And it is here I must say my goodbyes as well. Sect Leader Nie has informed us that he wishes to be gone before sundown, so I will be returning with them."

"Oh. You're leaving so soon?" said Jin Zixuan, looking a little crestfallen.

Meng Yao smiled at him and replied, "Yes, I'm afraid. I've already been away from my duties for too long as it is. I can't let Qinghe fall to ruin."

They both chuckled, before Jiang Yanli smiled at someone behind Meng Yao. "A-Yu! Come here, you have to say goodbye to Young Master Meng."

Meng Yao turned to watch Mo Xuanyu approach the couple cautiously. As he walked, he kept glancing up at Meng Yao, a troubled expression on his face. Meng Yao frowned a little and the Lady noticed also, asking softly as the boy reached her, "A-Yu? Is something wrong?"

Mo Xuanyu was quiet for a moment, glancing around at the three adults before mumbling, "Was told not to say."

Meng Yao's frown deepened and something in Jiang Yanli's expression sharpened. "Well, that depends, doesn't it? Did someone tell you not to say anything because they're doing something wrong?" Mo Xuanyu hesitated, then nodded. "A-Yu, you have to tell us if someone's doing something wrong. You won't be in trouble, I promise."

The boy was silent for a beat longer before saying, "Saw one of the cousins trying to get into Yao-ge's room."

Meng Yao wasn't surprised, but he affected the look of it. He exchanged a glance with Jin Zixuan, who's expression was becoming stormy. His brother stood up and said, "We'll go and

check.”

Jiang Yanli nodded, holding Mo Xuanyu close to her as she said, “Alright. I’ll make up an excuse.”

As Jin Zixuan made his way around the table, Meng Yao smile at Mo Xuanyu and said, “Thank you for your honesty, little master. You may have just saved me from a thief!”

Mo Xuanyu blinked up at him before a bright smile spread across his face. Meng Yao turned away and followed Jin Zixuan to one of the side exits to the hall that led towards the guest wing of the manor, the smile sliding from his face. They managed to slip out of the hall without being stopped and hurried towards the guest rooms. There was no one in the corridors, so their path went uninterrupted.

Finally they reached Meng Yao’s wooden door, and immediately they could hear there was someone inside. The brothers exchanged a glance before Jin Zixuan opened the door and they both burst through.

If Meng Yao had gained one thing from his time in the Fire Palace, it was the ability to act. It was why he was able to look of shocked and annoyed instead of smugly delighted when he saw Jin Zixun spring back from where he’d been rifling through Meng Yao’s clothes chest.

The three men stared at each other for a second before Meng Yao glanced around the room. Everything from his hair pin box to his bed linens had been disturbed, and it took all of his willpower not to suggest Jin Zixun turn away from the thief’s career path.

“What are you doing in here?” he said instead, slowly.

Jin Zixun glanced between them frantically before spluttering, “Cousin, it’s not what you think!”

“What is it then?” barked Jin Zixuan. “Because I think you are trying to rob my brother!”

Jin Zixun looked to Meng Yao, who kept his expression as one of veiled anger, as if his plan wasn’t falling into place. The Jin fool swallowed and said quickly, “He has demonic artefacts in here! I know it! He’s probably trying to poison us with his cultivation! I wanted to make sure he wasn’t doing anything evil.” He took a step towards Jin Zixuan. “You have to believe me! I know Uncle Jin will understand!”

“Zixun-xiong, you should have come to speak with me,” said Meng Yao in a small voice, folding his arms around himself. “I assure you that I would never bring anything dangerous to Koi Tower, and I would have been more than happy to explain the devices and talismans I do have here.”

“Behaving this way during a wedding. You have disrespected not only my brother, but me and my wife as well,” said Jin Zixuan, disgusted. He gestured for Jin Zixun and Meng Yao to follow him. “Come on. We end this now, before we cause a scene.”

Meng Yao followed without hesitation and after a moment of fluster, Jin Zixun trailed after them. Jin Zixuan led them back to one of the antechambers off the hall and flagged down a servant, snapping, “Get my father and Sect Leader Nie. Tell them it’s urgent.”

The servant bowed as Meng Yao’s eyes widened and he said hurriedly, “Oh, I don’t think Sect Leader Nie needs to-.”

“His deputy was almost robbed by a member of my sect. Your position makes this an intersect matter,” said Jin Zixuan sternly as the servant hurried off. He glared at where Jin Zixun was skulking in the corner and snapped, “I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Meng Yao swallowed and clasped his hands in front of him. Suddenly the dragon mosaic on the roof seemed to be more accusatory as it glared down at him. He hadn’t wanted Nie Mingjue to get involved in this. He had just wanted to humiliate his father a little. For all his drunken poetry, if it was a matter of demonic cultivation, it would only make things worse between himself and Sect Leader Nie.

Jin Zixuan looked to him and, misinterpreting his anxiety, said softly, “Don’t worry. I saw everything that happened, so if my father tries to twist the situation I’ll stop him.”

Meng Yao gave him a small smile and nodded, but then the door opened and his smile vanished. Jin Guangshan and Nie Mingjue stepped into the antechamber, shutting the door behind them and looking displeased. Jin Guangshan frowned at each of them before saying, “What could be so important that we are pulled away from *your* wedding feast A-Xuan. A-Li looks awfully lonely out there.”

Jin Zixuan jerked his head at his cousin and said, “We caught this fool attempting to rob A-Yao.”

Jin Guangshan and Nie Mingjue both looked to Jin Zixun, one troubled and one angry, but Meng Yao raised his eyebrows at his brother. The nickname was a slip, given the colour of Jin Zixuan’s ears, but Meng Yao hoped his smile conveyed encouragement.

“Really? And who accused him of this?” asked Jin Guangshan, opening his golden fan.

“No one. Mo Xuanyu let us know he’d seen Jin Zixun trying to get into Meng Yao’s rooms, so we went to investigate and found him ransacking the place,” said Jin Zixuan.

Nie Mingjue narrowed his eyes and growled, “Why were you trying to rob my advisor?”

Jin Zixun looked terrified before he turned to Jin Guangshan and said, “Uncle I’m sorry, I was just looking for what I told you about and-.”

“What you told me about?” said Jin Guangshan, a little too quickly. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Jin Zixun looked shocked. “The demonic artefacts! You told me you wanted to see them so-.”

“Father!” hissed Jin Zixuan whilst Nie Mingjue looked thunderous. Meng Yao kept his expression carefully neutral, though anxiety roiled in his stomach every time he glanced

towards Nie Mingjue.

Jin Guangshan, to his credit, had a rather convincing mask of incredulity. “Jin Zixun, you took my interest in Advisor Meng’s work as a cue to *rob* him?” He shook his head, giving his disciple a stern look. “To think that from my sect such thoughts emerge. What a disgrace.”

Jin Zixun went pale as Jin Guangshan turned to Nie Mingjue and bowed. “Sect Leader Nie, my deepest apologies. There had obviously been a grave misunderstanding. If any offence had been given, I am most grievously sorry.”

“I am not the one you should be apologising to,” said Nie Mingjue, eyes flashing. “And are you sure it was a misunderstanding? Because I have heard of your constant badgering of Wei Wuxian.”

Shock stabbed through Meng Yao and Jin Guangshan’s face went blank. “Whatever do you mean?”

Nie Mingjue lifted his chin. “I have heard of what is happening at the Qiongqi Path, and about your obsession with the Stygian Tiger Amulet. Given Wei Wuxian is not intimidated by you, it’s making me wonder if you are attempting to poach your need for demonic cultivation from somewhere else.”

Jin Guangshan let out a dry laugh. “Are you implying I have some sinister intention towards your advisor?”

“I know you’ve given him offers to change sects.”

Jin Guangshan shook his head. “You forget he is my son. And even if I was focussed solely on his demonic cultivation, is that necessarily a bad thing? We greater access to resources in the Lanling Jin Sect that could benefit him. Furthermore...” Jin Guangshan’s expression went cold. “I have heard many reports that having a demonic cultivator in your sect causes you much pain, Sect Leader Nie. So I have to ask, why is it that *you* are so determined to hold onto him?”

There was a stretched silence and Meng Yao’s mouth dried up. He was comforted by Jin Zixuan’s unflinching presence at his side, but he wanted nothing more than to flee the room. And then Nie Mingjue spoke.

“Because he is my advisor,” he said firmly. “And he is one of the most, if not the most loyal member of my sect. I trust him with my life. And while I may not agree with the cultivation path he has taken, I don’t doubt that he would only use that power for the good of the Qinghe Nie Sect.” He was now looking at Meng Yao, brown eyes meeting wide gold. “His presence in my sect has never caused me pain. Quite the opposite.”

The two stared at each other for a moment, Meng Yao too stunned to speak. He felt his cheeks heat and he dipped his head in silent thanks and embarrassment, all too aware of the other three men gaping at them.

Eventually Jin Guangshan coughed and fanned himself again, saying awkwardly, “I see. Well, you can rest assured that this disciple will be punished accordingly for invading Advisor Meng’s privacy.”

Nie Mingjue looked away from Meng Yao, pinning the other Sect Leader with a stormy look. “As it should be. I hope you realise from this discussion that the Qinghe Nie Sect is not as ignorant of your recent actions as you would like. Take care in the future not to insult us further.”

With that he turned and strode back out into the main hall. Jin Guangshan shot at scathing look towards Jin Zixun, saying in a low voice, “If you even think about showing your face in that hall again, I’ll feed you to a king snake.”

He then swept after the Nie Sect Leader, not sparing his sons another glance. Meng Yao looked to Jin Zixuan and saw his brother watching him with a faint smile. “That didn’t go the way I expected, but it was a good result nonetheless.”

Meng Yao bowed. “I’m sorry for causing you trouble.”

“You didn’t ask my cousin to attempt to rob you,” said Jin Zixuan nonchalantly, and Meng Yao almost smiled. However, he was distracted as his brother said, “This has certainly lifted a weight off my shoulders.”

Meng Yao tilted his head quizzically. “How so?”

Jin Zixuan smiled. “I was worried- as was A-Li- that when we sent you back to Qinghe we would be sending you back to a hostile environment. But I see now that I needn’t have worried.”

Meng Yao laughed and said, “I can see why I gave you that impression. But while Sect Leader Nie and I may have our differences, he was the one who rescued my mother and me from the brothel, and taught me cultivation. He even made me his advisor again after everything that happened during the Sunshot Campaign.” He smiled as a warm feeling swelled in his chest. “I am... most content to be his advisor.”

Jin Zixuan nodded, and they went to join the party once more.

“Da-ge, are you even listening to me!”

Nie Mingjue startled and dragged his eyes away from the window, saying dazedly, “What?”

Huaisang rolled his eyes then stomped over to his brother. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing!” Mingjue tried to shift to block Huaisang, but not before he caught sight of the slender cultivator conversing with one of the captains in the courtyard below.

Huaisang smirked at his brother and said, “We are discussing a very serious issue da-ge. This is no time to be lovesick.”

Mingjue seemed to choke on his own air and spluttered, “I was not-!”

“It’s alright da-ge, your very obvious secret is safe with me,” interrupted Huaisang smoothly. He frowned. “Have you spoken to Yao-ge yet?”

Mingjue hesitated. “Not beyond the regular reports.”

Huaisang sighed heavily. He had hoped after the wedding that his brother and Meng Yao would have been quick to talk things out and reconcile. Perhaps more than reconcile. But now he realised he had put too much faith in them. It had been almost two weeks since their return to Qinghe, and the two men had struck up some kind of awkward, shirking dance with each other. Huaisang knew Meng Yao had been delivering reports in person again, which was a vast improvement on their interactions before the wedding, but they were never alone together and he knew they didn’t speak to each other on a personal level anymore.

And yet every time they were near each other, they were casting longing looks across the room when the other wasn’t looking. Even the servants were becoming frustrated at this point.

“Da-ge, you must speak with him!” said Huaisang, casting a pleading look at his brother. “Tip-toeing around each other isn’t good for either of you. Especially you! You are *terrible* at tip-toeing!”

“It’s not that simple Huaisang!” snapped Mingjue, bolting to his feet and beginning to pace. Huaisang scampered out of his brother’s frustrated path, watching as he scratched at his head, pulling some of his hair out of his hairpiece. “I realise I was too harsh on him, but I won’t take back my anger for that day in the village. He was too reckless, and I don’t want him to think that just because I accept his cultivation technique that I also condone him taking risks.”

“Tell him this, da-ge!” huffed Huaisang.

Mingjue shook his head. “Normally I would, but I... I feel I would say something hurtful again because of these other... feelings I have.” He stopped, rubbing at his eyes. “When I am emotional like this, I fear what I’ll blurt out.”

“That’s fair enough da-ge, but it’s still important for you to speak with him. And let him know how you feel while you’re at it.”

Mingjue gave him a look like he’d kicked a puppy. “And ruin any and all chances of friendship with him? No. I may not be adept in such matters, but I know when to keep my mouth shut.”

Huaisang wanted to scream, punch a wall, then punch his brother. “Da-ge, I keep telling you, Meng Yao will not be frightened by your feelings!”

Mingjue snorted. “I know he will pretend to be fine, and give me the sweetest rejection. But you know how well he hides discomfort.”

Huaisang threw up his hands. “I give up. Now, can we please focus on the crisis at hand again? Conditions aren’t getting any better for those people at the Path.”

Mingjue grunted his affirmation, but his continual sighs throughout the rest of their meeting made Huaisang want to tear his own hair out.

Meng Yao woke up gasping, sending the documents he had fallen asleep on cascading to the floor. His heart stuttered in his chest as his breath caught in his throat and it took him a moment to smell the scent of pine and register that it wasn’t the scent of blood, that there wasn’t a monster in human skin looming over him, that he didn’t have to brace himself for claws or leather or metal to tear at his flesh.

He had fallen asleep whilst going over the latest budget, and his lantern had long since burned out. Once he had regained control over his thoughts, he glanced towards the window and realised it must be the middle of the night or the early hours of the morning. Looking down at his sums, he scowled when he saw his cheek had smudged his penmanship.

He went to relight the lantern, but he was shaking so badly he dropped the flint. Frustrated he jumped to his feet and all but ran out the door and into the small courtyard. There was a pond in the centre of this courtyard and an old maple growing beside it. He went to stand by the tree and breathed deeply, trying to clear his mind. Clouds drifted across the moon overhead, and when they cleared enough to let some moonlight through he looked into the still waters of the pond.

He froze when he noticed the dark smear of ink blooming on his cheek. It should have been funny. It should have been something for Huaisang or his mother or Nie Mingjue to tease his about, and for him to get flustered and laughingly try to wipe away.

Instead all he could think of was a long, thin dagger being pressed into his hands and plunging it into the heart of a man who had done nothing but smash a cup. The man had gurgled and thrashed as Wen Ruohan had wrapped his hands around Meng Yao’s in the parody of a caress and forced him to drag the dagger down. Flesh parted before the honed blade and then a clawed hand had dipped into the wound, twisting and grabbing. When the hand emerged it was coated in blood, and it pressed to Meng Yao’s cheek and dragged down. He had been forced to look at that smear against his pale skin in a golden mirror as his master had whispered toxic nothings into his ear, bit at the lobe, run a warm, wet tongue down his neck...

The sob tore itself from his throat unexpectedly. Suddenly tears were running down his face and his legs could not support him. Pain shot through his knees as they hit the stones on the edge of the water, and he clamped his hands over his mouth to prevent any sound from escaping him. He couldn’t describe the feeling tearing through him; he couldn’t even think. He was drowning in it.

Then he heard fast footsteps and a large figure crouched down beside him. “Meng Yao? Meng Yao, what’s wrong?”

Meng Yao turned his head to look into the concerned, no, *frightened* face of Nie Mingjue. He shook his head, dropping his hands to splutter out, “I- I’m okay- I’m sorry- please, this isn’t-.”

Another sob tore itself from his throat and he covered his mouth again, bending over at his waist. He squeezed his eyes shut as he continued to cry, and after a moment he felt Nie Mingjue’s large hand rest gently on his back.

It’s weight was tender and warm, not oppressive at all, and it remained there until Meng Yao’s sobs had subsided. Eventually he was able to sit up straight, his eyes stinging, and he croaked, “I’m sorry Sect Leader, I don’t know what came over me...”

Gentle fingers tilted Meng Yao’s chin towards Nie Mingjue, and his breathing shuddered under the scrutiny of those deep brown eyes. The Sect Leader’s thumb brushed over the ink smear and he asked, firm yet tender, “What happened? Did someone do this to you?”

Meng Yao let out a humourless bark of laughter and moved to wipe at his own cheek. “No, I did this to myself. Fell asleep on wet ink.”

Nie Mingjue frowned. “How late were you working?”

Meng Yao shrugged, glad for the distraction. “Late. With winter coming there are a lot of budgets and distributions I need to calculate before the snows come.”

Nie Mingjue was still frowning at him. “It’s still important that you rest Meng Yao. Perhaps...” He made a vague gesture around Meng Yao’s face. “*this* is to do with exhaustion.”

Meng Yao didn’t doubt there was some truth to Nie Mingjue’s words, but he couldn’t admit that now. He affixed his mask and said, “I assure you I’m fine Sect Leader. I suppose staying up all night isn’t the wisest course of action, but this is the first time I’ve-.”

“Meng Yao.” Nie Mingjue voice was stern and Meng Yao flinched, hating himself. His whole body felt like an exposed nerve, raw and flaring with agony. “You know I don’t like dishonesty.”

Meng Yao froze. “What do you mean, Sect Leader?”

Nie Mingjue sighed and dropped his hand, getting to his feet, helping Meng Yao do the same. “The servants have told me you’ve been seen doing this since even before the wedding. One of the older maids came to me weeks ago because she was worried it was a sign you were getting sick.”

Meng Yao was silent, fuming at himself for getting caught. After a beat, Nie Mingjue asked slowly, “Meng Yao, if something is happening with your cultivation...”

Anger flared in Meng Yao’s chest and he snapped, “It’s not. And with all due respect Sect Leader, we have already talked about my cultivation technique, and I never wish to repeat the experience.”

There was a flash of irritation in Nie Mingjue's eyes as he shot back, "You cannot blame me for being worried Meng Yao. No matter how hard you try to hide it, you look sick!"

"I feel fine Sect Leader."

"Stop lying!"

Meng Yao was taken aback. The Sect Leader looked angry, as he always did during such confrontations, but there was something more under his expression. It took Meng Yao a moment to recognise it as melancholic concern, tinged with guilt. He almost laughed at his sorry state, being unable to recognise when someone was genuinely feeling for him.

Nie Mingjue took a few deep breaths before saying, "We never... we've never talked about what happened at the village."

Meng Yao raised his eyebrows. "I assumed you didn't wish to speak about it, Sect Leader. For what more is there to say? We simply don't agree on the matter."

Nie Mingjue looked pained before coughing and saying, "When you went to the wedding it gave me time to think. I realise... with how I have treated your cultivation technique up until this point, I realise I must have... indicated that I don't trust you. That is wholly untrue. I merely fear for your wellbeing."

Meng Yao stared at him, a strange feeling building in his chest. After a beat of silence he sighed. "I admit, I was feeling those things. But also... Sect Leader, forgive me for being frank, but your constant criticism of this part of me is exhausting, and the village was my breaking point."

To Meng Yao's surprise, the defensiveness he expected never came. Instead Nie Mingjue nodded and said, "I have been ignoring the good you are trying to do with your cultivation, and for that I apologise. My concern for your well being clouded my view."

Meng Yao stared at the Sect Leader for a moment before a knot loosened in his chest and he smiled. "And I apologise too, for the unkind things I said towards your clan."

Nie Mingjue nodded and Meng Yao was suddenly left with no idea what to do. His earlier terror had gone, the argument had been resolved, there was no reason for them to still be together. Swallowing, Meng Yao dipped his head and said, "Well then Sect Leader, it is late. We should probably both retire. I bid you goodnight."

He turned but hadn't even taken a step when a large hand grabbed him by the arm and Nie Mingjue said, "Meng Yao, wait!"

Meng Yao turned back to him, confused, and his eyes widened when the Sect Leader's other hand came up to rest on his shoulder. The Sect Leader's ears had turned pink as he muttered, not quite able to meet Meng Yao's gaze, "I wanted you to know that-. Well, I care about you because- because-. You need to know that-."

Meng Yao felt frozen as the Sect Leader struggled to find words. His cheeks heated and his heart began to pound as a nameless anticipation threatened to burst forth from his chest.

“I have to show you something,” Nie Mingjue blurted out.

The anticipation wilted a little but curiosity was quick to take its place. “Oh? Are you sure you don’t want to wait until morning? It is quite late-.”

“No, it- come with me,” said Nie Mingjue, before taking Meng Yao by the hand and pulling him towards the eastern side of the fortress, where the family’s quarters were located. Meng Yao’s gaze flickered frantically between their interlocked hands and the corridors around them, hoping they didn’t run into any servants who got the wrong idea. His cheeks were flaming, but thankfully they didn’t see anyone, and he was especially glad of this when Nie Mingjue dragged him all the way to his own private quarters.

It was as Nie Mingjue was opening the door that Meng Yao finally squeaked, “Sect Leader, wait!”

Nie Mingjue paused and looked back at him, frowning. Meng Yao coughed and said, “This isn’t- This isn’t appropriate! What if somebody sees!”

Nie Mingjue looked surprised before a teasing smirk crossed his features and he replied, “I wasn’t aware we were planning on doing anything untoward.”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened and he smacked the Sect Leader on the arm with his free hand. “That’s not the point! It’s appearances, not motive! Besides, I don’t know *why* we are here. You could be planning something untoward for all I know.”

Nie Mingjue rolled his eyes and proceeded to drag Meng Yao into the room. “Stop being dramatic. Come on.”

And so Meng Yao found himself standing in the private quarters of Nie Mingjue at Qinghe for the first time.

They were, unsurprisingly, bare. Everything was in shades of white, grey or the Qinghe Nie Sect colours. There were no ostentatious or gaudy decorations, just a few hanging scrolls on the walls and a simple black and white painting of cranes Meng Yao recognised as one of Nie Huaisang’s hanging near the bed. The bed was probably the most luxurious item in the room, being large and oak and covered in deep green sheets, the price of which would probably make any common man weep. Baxia had a place of honour underneath Huaisang’s painting, and in the corner was a small bowl of incense. Everything smelt of pine and Nie Mingjue and despite himself, Meng Yao found himself relaxing.

Nie Mingjue didn’t stop in the room, instead striding over to the back doors that no doubt led out into a private courtyard. He opened the door and then turned to beckon Meng Yao through. Meng Yao complied, and when he saw what lay outside his heart leapt into his throat.

Instead of seeing the usual sparse gravel courtyards that were common in the Unclean Realm, Meng Yao found himself looking at several neat plots of tilled earth that spanned the length of the courtyard, except for one bare patch in the corner. It was evidently the bare bones of a garden.

Nie Mingjue coughed and Meng Yao turned to him, speechless. The Sect Leader gestured to the dirt patches and said, "This is the reason I was out tonight. I was going to see if we had another plough, because mine broke. I've been having trouble stilling my thoughts, and when you got back from Lanling I was reminded of your suggestion of how to occupy myself. I picked up a few tips during our time in the villages, and I never used this courtyard anyway, so..." He swallowed. "I haven't planted anything yet. I wanted to wait for your input until I started that part." He looked down at Meng Yao, his expression softening. "I want this to be just as much yours as it is mine."

It took Meng Yao a few moments to compose himself, so overwhelmed by warmth and fondness as he was. The intensity of his feelings made no sense. It was just a garden. And yet it was taking all his willpower not to reach up and kiss this stubborn, silly, kind man. Instead he let out a little laugh and said, "This is wonderful Sect Leader! I'm so glad you enjoy it. I would be happy to help, but it really is your garden..."

Nie Mingjue shook his head. "No. It's ours." A pink blush spread over his cheeks as he looked away again. "And you don't have to keep calling me Sect Leader when we're in private. You can call me Mingjue, or... or da-ge or something."

Meng Yao didn't notice the way his flush deepened at his last words, too preoccupied with his own embarrassment. "Oh no, Sect Leader, I couldn't do that! That would be much too forward, I couldn't possibly-!"

"Meng Yao," interrupted Nie Mingjue, but there was no heat behind the reprimand. "I feel we've known each other for too long and been through too much to keep up such formalities in private."

Meng Yao stared at him, wanting to continue to resist, but he caved embarrassingly quickly under that coaxing gaze. "Very well Sect Lea-, I mean... da-ge."

Nie Mingjue smiled at him and Meng Yao felt truly light hearted for the first time in years.

Once again they returned to a routine, albeit with more interaction. It was a huge relief to Meng Yao to not have to avoid his Sect Leader anymore, and it was an even bigger relief to be free of the bitter tension between them. During the day they worked side by side on the matters of the sect, and every second night or free afternoon they had they would work on the garden.

Even though he had suggested the hobby for Nie Mingjue, Meng Yao hadn't realised how much enjoyment he would draw from it as well. Working out the intricacies of what to plant where, how much to water it, how much to feed it, how much sunlight it needed, was incredibly satisfying. And more than that, the garden gave both of them the opportunity to be more open with each other than they ever had. They could laugh with each other, bicker

without heat, or just enjoy each other's silent company. And even though it was dangerous and unrealistic, Meng Yao allowed himself to wish sometimes that they could do this in the open, that they could be more than Sect Leader and Advisor in the eyes of the wider world.

And yet, looming over all this were the nightmares. The prospect of sleep had become more daunting than any Night Hunt Meng Yao had ever attended. He wouldn't always just be back in the Fire Palace, surrounded by the smell of blood, the corpses of his loved ones at his feet. It wouldn't always be the remembered nights in Wen Ruohan's private chambers. Sometimes it would be at Qinghe and his happiness would be ripped away from him in the blink of an eye, the Unclean Realm burning, Wen Ruohan looming over him, laughing, taunting him that he had ever believed he could kill a god amongst men...

Meng Yao felt a hand on his shoulder and he gasped awake, trying to scramble away and falling to the ground, his elbow smarting at it hit the wooden floor. "Forgive me Sect Leader Wen, I didn't mean to-."

"Meng Yao!"

Meng Yao froze, blinking back into himself as Nie Mingjue knelt down in front of him a frown on his face. "It's me. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Meng Yao stared at him, panting for a second, before allowing the big man to help him to his feet. "My deepest apologies da-ge, I don't know what happened." He glanced at the table he had fallen asleep on, the scroll he had been reading now askew. "I must have dozed off..."

Nie Mingjue was examining him now, still frowning. "You look even more exhausted than you did this morning. Before this doze, when was the last time you slept?"

Meng Yao hesitated, racking his brains, before replying, "Yesterday. I think."

"You think?" Nie Mingjue's frown deepened. "For how long?"

Meng Yao briefly considered lying, then admitted, "An hour or so. Here and there."

Nie Mingjue's eyes widened. "Meng Yao, that's not healthy. Have you gone to the healers about this?"

Meng Yao shrugged. "I told them I was having trouble sleeping and they gave me some herbs. Unfortunately they didn't do much." He smiled. "It's fine da-ge. It will pass."

Nie Mingjue glared at him for a second before looking out the window towards the mountains beyond. "You called me Sect Leader Wen. Were you dreaming about him?"

Meng Yao froze, feeling as though his throat was closing up. Nie Mingjue glanced at him, his expression forcefully schooled into neutrality as he continued, "I'm not offended. And you don't need to give me particulars, but..." He let out a short exhalation. "Perhaps it would do you some good to get whatever it is weighing you down off your chest. And you've certainly listened to enough of my problems, so..."

Meng Yao considered the offer. He wondered if it would help, to eject the poison he had been building up in his body out into the world. The idea was appealing. But the second he thought about saying anything he felt chills down his spine and his heart beginning to pound.

Dipping his head, he said quietly, “Thank you da-ge, but... I am not ready yet. Give me some time, and then maybe...”

Nie Mingjue nodded, and a silence fell between them, laden with something Meng Yao didn’t want to examine. Eventually Nie Mingjue said, “I think I will call Lan Xichen here. He has played the Song of Clarity to me to help calm my sabre spirit. Perhaps it can help with your nightmares as well.”

Meng Yao smiled and nodded. “Yes, perhaps that will do me good. It will be good to see him. But only if he is not too busy.”

Nie Mingjue nodded. “I will write to him tonight.”

Of course Lan Xichen came rushing to help, but Meng Yao couldn’t help but feel guilty when he heard of how busy the sect leader had been. However, his concerns were waved off with impenetrable nonchalance as Lan Xichen said, “It is good to step away for a while. Besides, da-ge seemed quite concerned for you in his letter, so I decided it was a matter of priority.”

Meng Yao blushed and replied, “A matter of inconvenience more like it. Da-ge- I mean, Sect Leader Nie was overstating things.”

Lan Xichen’s eyes twinkled as he said lightly, “If you say so.”

Lan Xichen decided to play for Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue together in the evening, in one of the more secluded dining halls. They sat side by side with Lan Xichen sitting across from them, his instrument laid out in front of him. The second the notes started thrumming from the guqin, Meng Yao felt their power wash over him, like cool water running over his brow on a hot day.

It didn’t take long for Meng Yao’s eyelids to start drooping and his head began to nod. He made a half-hearted attempt to cling to consciousness, vaguely remembering that it was rude to fall asleep with guests around, but he didn’t have the resilience to put up much of a fight. Then he felt a strong arm wrapping around his shoulders and gently pulling him to the side so his head was resting on a shoulder. He made a small noise of protest and managed to mumble, his own voice sounding very far away, “Da-ge, you don’t have to...”

He was shushed and a deep, tender voice murmured in return, “It’s fine. Rest. You’re safe here.”

Meng Yao smiled as he complied, for once not afraid of what waited for him beyond.

Meng Yao was again practising the song Lan Xichen had taught him before departing, Huaisang sitting with a dreamy smile nearby, when he heard a great commotion outside the

doors. He and Huaisang exchanged a confused glance before the door to the music room was thrown open and Wei Wuxian swept in in a whirlwind of black robes, a harassed looking servant in his wake.

“Deepest apologies Young Master, Advisor Meng, but he-,” the servant tried, only to be interrupted by Wei Wuxian throwing himself down in front of Meng Yao and crying out joyously, “Yao-ge! We’re going to be uncles!”

Meng Yao went blank for a moment. “I beg your pardon?”

“Shijie and the peacock are having a baby!” exclaimed Wei Wuxian, beaming. Meng Yao gasped and Huaisang let out a little squeal as Wei Wuxian continued, “The peacock was going to write to you, but I was coming here after seeing them, so I convinced him to let me tell you. He wants me to describe your expression! And guess what? I got to choose the courtesy name! Jin Rulan if it’s a boy.”

“That’s wonderful news!” said Huaisang, clapping his hands. “I should tell da-ge so we can write our congratulations.”

Meng Yao couldn’t help the wide grin that crept over his face as warmth stole through him. “It is wonderful. They’re both going to be wonderful parents.”

Wei Wuxian laughed. “Well, I always knew shijie would be the best mother in the world, and the peacock has really shaped up, hasn’t he? Not so sure about the paternal grandparents though.”

Huaisang waved a hand at them. “Jin Guangshan and his wife may be horrible to everyone else, but I assure you they’ll spoil that child rotten. They’ll just be thrilled to be grandparents.” With a happy sigh Huaisang began to rise. “I’ll go tell da-ge so we can send our congratulations as soon as possible.”

“Ah, Huaisang-xiong, wait a minute.”

Huaisang paused and he and Meng Yao both gave Wei Wuxian a quizzical look. An uncharacteristically regretful look came into his expression and a little pit of dread formed in Meng Yao’s stomach as Wei Wuxian said, “I- I’m glad I was able to deliver the good news, but there was another reason I came here actually.”

Meng Yao sat up a little straighter and asked, “Anything we can help with?”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “I need the Nie Sect’s support. It’s about the Wen remnants. Jiang Cheng and shijie and Lan Zhan have been supportive, but... I need more back up.” He looked down at where he was picking his own nails. “Something happened at the Qiongqi Path.”

Out of the corner of his eye Meng Yao saw Huaisang stiffen, but they both remained silent and waited for Wei Wuxian to continue. Wei Wuxian sighed then said, “My friend, Wen Ning... do you know him Yao-ge?” Meng Yao nodded. “Well... he was killed.”

Meng Yao gasped, images of the sweet, shy boy who startled at shadows and clung to his innocent optimism in the despair of Qishan flashed before his eyes. “What? When? How?”

“Last week,” Wei Wuxian admitted. “The overseers at the labour camp... well, the won’t admit it but I think they beat him to death. However...”

Wei Wuxian trailed off, but before he could continue, Huaisang suddenly said, “You brought him back, didn’t you?”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened as Wei Wuxian nodded. “As a fierce corpse?”

“No! Well, yes.” Wei Wuxian leaned forward, eager uncertainty glistening in his eyes as he looked at Meng Yao. “He’s a fierce corpse, but I managed to save his consciousness! He’s still Wen Ning!”

Meng Yao was astonished, but he set his mouth into a firm line. “I want to see him.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “Of course. But... there is something else...” Meng Yao narrowed his eyes. “I may or may not have broken the Wens out of the Qiongqi Path camp, and your father may or may not be frothing at the mouth about it.”

“What?” Meng Yao barked. “How- How have we not have word of this?”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Jin Guangshan is probably trying to cover it up. He knew he’d lose any chance of support from Gusu Lan and Qinghe Nie if they found out what had really been going on in that camp, especially because the Wens already had the support of the Young Masters.”

Meng Yao fell silent, indignation swirling in his gut. He promised himself that his next task would be to completely overhaul the Nie Sect’s spy network, whether Nie Mingjue thought it was dishonourable or not.

“I’m guessing you’ve taken them to the Burial Mounds?” asked Huaisang.

Wei Wuxian looked surprised but he nodded. Meng Yao gasped and hissed, “The *Burial Mounds*? Wei Wuxian, they’re civilians!”

“I warded them in! They’re perfectly safe! From spirits at least,” protested Wei Wuxian.

Meng Yao rolled his eyes but dropped the subject. “Very well. We should get back to them as soon as possible and work this issue out before it develops into something else. My father is probably trying to find a way to use this to twist your image even further and garner more support for his plan to take the Stygian Tiger Amulet.”

“We should leave tomorrow,” said Huaisang, again rising. “The sooner we intervene the better. I’ll go speak to da-ge.”

Meng Yao and Wei Wuxian both looked at him, surprised, and Meng Yao said, “Huaisang-di, you’re coming too?”

Huaisang smiled at him and nodded. “I want to see the best possible outcome, and you’ll need all the support you can get.”

Surprise flickered through Meng Yao as he looked Huaisang up and down, again feeling that there was more to the Young Master than he let on. However, mask or no mask, Meng Yao was comforted that they wouldn’t be alone in this fight.

Nie Mingjue tried to cling to his fury over the deception and atrocities Jin Guangshan had committed. It was a righteous fury, an honourable one. And he would much prefer to have it seizing hold of him rather than the anxiety and irritation he felt as Meng Yao packed a small travel bag.

“We should be gone for three days at the most. Hopefully less,” Meng Yao was explaining, folding a pair of pants into the satchel. “My apologies for the short notice, but...”

“You have to go. I understand,” said Mingjue. His advisor smiled at him appreciatively and a pang went through him. “If you need support, don’t hesitate to send word. I will get there as fast as I can.”

Meng Yao chuckled and replied, “Thank you da-ge. And please don’t worry, Wei-di and I can look after ourselves, and look after the Young Master. I will write as soon as this issue is resolved.”

Mingjue only half heard the last part of his sentence, too busy wrestling with the green beast that had reared its ugly head when Meng Yao had smiled so fondly upon mention of Wei Wuxian. He had seen them walking around the estate together yesterday, the boisterous young cultivator much too close to Meng Yao for Mingjue’s liking, and Meng Yao seemed lighter around him. Not that he was sombre around Mingjue, but the sight of it made Mingjue want to stride over and seize Meng Yao and kiss him senseless so that everyone knew who he belonged to.

The possessiveness fed into the fantasy that had been embarrassingly dominating his thoughts at night. Every night in his thoughts, Meng Yao slowly let his robes slide down his body and pool around his ankles, revealing creamy skin and pert nipples. He would approach Mingjue who sat on bed, smiling, and Mingjue would pull him down onto the bed, cage him with his arms, shudder as Meng Yao’s legs opened to him, as his fingers ghosted over him, as he said invitingly, *look at the state you’re in, let me help you da-ge...*

Mingjue sighed at his own stupidity. He had no right to these feelings, because even if Meng Yao reciprocated his feelings, he belonged to no one. Yet they refused to abate.

“Da-ge? What’s wrong?”

Mingjue tried not to blush when he realised his sigh had been rather obvious. He shook his head and said, “Nothing. I was just thinking how dull things are going to be around here without you. And I won’t even have my younger brother to distract me.”

An attractive rosy flush came onto Meng Yao's cheeks as his gaze swept the floor, demure and beautiful. An image of Meng Yao looking like that spread out on Mingjue's sheets and he swallowed.

"Is da-ge saying he will miss me?" asked Meng Yao.

Mingjue nodded and said, "Yes. I will." A tight heat was building low in Mingjue's abdomen, so he coughed and found some courage to say, "Meng Yao. When you get back, I need to tell you something. And I want you to know that it will by no means affect your position at Qinghe if you don't like what you hear." Meng Yao looked confused, so Mingjue said quickly, "I have to return to my duties, so I will say my goodbyes here."

Meng Yao still looked confused, but he smiled nonetheless and replied, "Alright da-ge. I will be back soon. Please take care of yourself until then."

Mingjue nodded and for the first time regretted not having the same way with words that Huaisang had. He was bad with farewells, so instead he simply gave Meng Yao a small smile and turned and walked out the door.

"Sect Leader Nie isn't seeing you off?" asked Meng Shi, looking over Meng Yao's shoulder with a frown. Wei Wuxian and Huaisang stood nearby, getting ready to set off on their rushed journey.

Meng Yao smiled fondly, a fluttering feeling in his stomach as replied, "No, he said his farewells earlier."

Meng Shi tilted her head, examining Meng Yao's face and smiling as she sighed, "Ah, to be young and in love."

Meng Yao gasped and hissed, "Mother, I'm not-!"

"Ah!" Meng Shi pressed a finger to his lips. "Don't lie to your mother."

Meng Yao paused then whispered conspiratorially, aware of Huaisang and Wei Wuxian watching them, "Well, when I get back, we'll see where that goes."

Meng Shi beamed at him and patted his cheek. "Good boy. Now off with you. Do me proud."

When they reached the Yiling Burial Mounds, wading through the power that washed off them, Meng Yao found himself walking into a situation that was much worse than he had been led to believe. And judging by Wei Wuxian's expression, this was a new development.

Over sixty Jin cultivators were spread out in the clearing that lay before the path into the burial mounds, archers positioned on the rock formations above them. Blocking the path was Lan Wangji, stone faced as usual, a hand resting loosely on his sword. At the front of the Jin cultivators stood Jin Zixun, red face and screaming.

“Move out of the way or we will *make* you move!” Jin Zixun shrieked as Meng Yao, Wei Wuxian and Nie Huaisang ran up to them.

“Stop!” shouted Wei Wuxian, skidding onto the scene and placing himself in front of Lan Wangji. “What’s going on?”

“Wei Ying,” murmured Lan Wangji, his expression softening at the sight of the other cultivator.

Jin Zixun pointed a pudgy figure at Wei Wuxian and snapped, “Wei Wuxian! Enough is enough! We are here to arrest you and all the prisoners you helped escape.”

“Now, now,” said Huaisang, stepping forward. “I feel that to make a decision as large as that, the other great sects need to be consulted.”

Jin Zixun looked shocked, then his eyes went to Meng Yao and his lip curled. “Of course you would go running to your filthy conspirator. You son of a whore. You’ll pay for siding with this criminal.”

“Zixun-xiong,” said Meng Yao calmly, brushing off the insult. “Please calm down for a moment. You have to know that Wei Wuxian has the backing of the Qinghe Nie Sect and harming him will cause an incident. This seems like something that needs discussion rather than action. Please, we can get word to Sect Leader Nie and-.”

“Fuck you!” spat Jin Zixun. “We are done talking! Wei Wuxian, surrender yourselves and the Wens immediately!” A cruel smirk curled his lips. “Do it now, and we’ll make their executions quick. We might even show Wen Qing the greatest night of her life before she dies.”

The resentful energy surged. Meng Yao felt too slow as he turned and watched jagged shadows shoot towards Jin Zixun. It would be too late to act, too late to prevent the disaster. Jin Zixun’s expression shifted into one of terror as the shadows drew near...

Then a golden shield exploded to life in front of the man, dissipating the shadows. Meng Yao looked to the right and saw his brother running towards them, a furious expression on his face. He shouted something but it was too late. Arrows were flying.

Meng Yao instinctively threw himself in front of Huaisang, batting the arrows away with his own shadows. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the energy around Wei Wuxian surging and Lan Wangji defending him, a frightened expression in his eyes. He heard his brother shouting at the cultivators, trying to draw them off, and then Wei Wuxian roared, “JIN ZIXUAN!”

The bellow was so loud that it combined with his brother’s commands stilled the chaos. Terror rose in Meng Yao’s chest as he saw Wei Wuxian’s twisted expression as he glared at Jin Zixuan, eyes red and unsteady. The energy was consuming him.

“Did you know about this?” snarled Wei Wuxian. “You knew about this and did nothing, didn’t you? You do don’t you? After weeks of your sect wearing me down, how could you

not? Wanted to swoop in at the last minute once we were all dead just to appease my shijie's heart? How convenient that your father's biggest problems would all be dealt with by then!"

Jin Zixuan's face darkened and he shouted back, "Wei Wuxian! You need to stop! I have never conspired against you! You have to calm down before the situation becomes any worse than it is!"

"*LIAR!*"

Suddenly there was the sound of chains and a figure crashed into the ground in front of Wei Wuxian. Dressed in black, eyes empty, his face twisted in a dog-like snarl, Meng Yao almost didn't recognise Wen Ning. But then he charged at Jin Zixuan.

"Stop him!" screamed Huaisang, and the terror in his voice spurred Meng Yao into action.

He didn't think, he only felt. He felt the ties of the resentful energy, writhing and biting and feeding itself off Wei Wuxian. He gathered his own and sliced through them all, like a knife through cloth, carefully avoiding the deeper bond that tied Wen Ning to this world.

Jin Zixuan just had time to flinch before Wen Ning hit the dirt in front of him, whilst Wei Wuxian gasped and fell to his knees.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji called out, terrified, crouching beside Wei Wuxian.

Meng Yao turned to Huaisang and snapped, "Stay down," before running over to them. He crouched down next to the other demonic cultivator and seized him by the chin, forcing Wei Wuxian to look at him, even though his grey eyes were unfocussed.

"Wei Wuxian!" he said, voice firm. "Come back. You are not one of them. You do not let your hatred control you. You have too many people who love you for you to vanish into the dark." His mind flashed back to a room that smelt of blood, a cold voice using pain to drag him from the vortex of resentment. He leaned forward and hissed, "And they will never forgive you if you let this win."

He felt Wei Wuxian freeze and then the tension began to drain from him. Meng Yao leaned back and watched as the sharp light came back into Wei Wuxian's eyes and he murmured, "Yao-ge? What...?"

Lan Wangji let out a breath and Meng Yao's shoulders slumped, only for a frown to crease his brow again as anger began to rise. He turned around, ready to spit venom-.

It felt like being punched as the arrow buried itself in his chest. He fell from his crouch, landing in a sitting position on the ground. He heard Jin Zixuan shout, Huaisang wail. He lifted a shaking hand to brush over the arrow shaft, marvelling at the beautiful grey and white feathers as a dark stain bloomed like a flower over his robes. There were hands on him and he was pulled into Jin Zixuan's arms as his brother's pale face filled his vision. He was being shouted at, but he couldn't make out the words. The sun was suddenly very bright.

Oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

God this is late, sorry about that. Exam week made me not write for about 4 days straight cause there is nothing like stress to kill motivation. Hope this was a good one though. I liked writing it! Thank you all for reading and commenting!

Edit: thank you Lwoorl for letting me know about misnaming Jiang Yanli!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Mingjue almost stumbled, so heavy was his landing on the path before the Yiling Burial Mounds. Baxia was humming in excitement, sensing his agitation and the resentful energy engulfing them, and expecting a battle. But Mingjue's agitation was pure fear, and he didn't bother hiding it as he ran towards the tree-lined path.

Mingjue had barely registered most of Huaisang's letter when it arrived. All he could focus on was *Meng Yao, shot, dire...* he had set off the second the message had been relayed and had rushed through the night to get here. He didn't even care that he had been asked to come to a place as dark as the Burial Mounds. He could feel exhaustion and spiritual depletion seeping into his body, but he refused to let it slow him down. He had to see Meng Yao, for all he could think about as he rushed over was what he would do if he didn't make it in time.

Suddenly a figure stepped out from behind one of the skeletal trees and partial relief flooded through him when he realised it was Huaisang. He ran towards his brother, seizing him in a tight embrace and gasping, “A-Sang! Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“No da-ge,” came Huaisang’s small voice, muffled against Mingjue’s robes. When he stood back, Mingjue saw tears welling up in his brother’s eyes. “Da-ge, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know it would be dangerous like that, I wouldn’t have gone-.”

“It wasn’t your fault Huaisang. I’m just glad you’re safe.” Mingjue paused before asking, half dreading the answer, “A-Sang... Meng Yao...”

“Follow me,” said Huaisang immediately.

The Burial mounds were as gloomy and oppressive as Mingjue had imagined them to be, but he found himself impressed by the strength and proficiency of the wards protecting the path. Even more surprising was the small makeshift village they almost stumbled into at the end of the path, set up around the mouth of a cave.

Mingjue looked around, wide-eyed, at the ramshackle buildings and tents and the small farm that had been set up in the centre of the clearing. The people wandering about were very young, old or crippled, dressed in raggedy, hand stitched clothes and looking entirely out of place amongst the surroundings. Huaisang moved straight past them, heading for the cave and Mingjue followed, feeling like an intruder once the people caught sight of him and the smiles all vanished.

They stepped into the gloom of the cage and Mingjue seen it had been set up as a hybrid living space and experiment space, the floor in one corner littered with talisman designs. The soft, resonant notes of a guqin drifted in from one of the adjoined caves, and sound asleep on a palette in a corner was Wei Wuxian.

He looked terrible, even in sleep, his face gaunt and dark circles under his eyes. A small boy was sitting by his bedside, but when he turned and saw Huaisang he beamed and came rushing over. “Fan-ge! Wei-ge is still asleep! Can you play with me?”

Huaisang smiled fondly at the little boy and said softly, “Voices down A-Yuan, we don’t want to wake him up! I’ll play with you in a bit, okay? I just have to take my brother to visit Yao-ge.”

The little boy craned his neck to look up at Mingjue and shrank back a little. Mingjue winced, not quite knowing how to act. He hadn’t had to deal with children since Huaisang.

“Go and sit with Wei-ge again A-Yuan,” said Huaisang. The little boy hesitated, then ran back to the palette, allowing Huaisang to continue leading Mingjue to the next room. When they stepped into the dim space, Mingjue’s eyes immediately went to the palette sitting in the centre of the room and his breath caught in his throat.

Meng Yao was deathly pale, the only indication that he wasn’t dead being the shallow movement of his chest as he breathed. Bloodied bandages were strewn about the sick bed and a young woman was leaning over him tending to the long gash over his right pectoral and the ugly stitches that sliced through it. Sitting beside her was Lan Wangji, his guqin across his lap, a song of healing unfolding as his fingers plucked at the strings. He glanced up as Mingjue and Huaisang approached, nodding but not ceasing playing.

The woman also looked up as the came to stand beside the bed and similarly didn’t stop her work. “He’s fighting the infection, but he’s still in danger. He’ll need more spiritual energy soon to stabilise him. And Young Master Lan will need to rest.”

“Not tired,” murmured Lan Wangji.

Mingjue’s mind snapped back to clarity and he wrenched his gaze away from his advisor’s clammy face. “Who are you? Why hasn’t he been taken to a proper physician?”

“Wen Qing,” replied the woman, unphased. “He would have died if we took him anywhere else.”

Mingjue’s hackles rose instinctively at her name, but Huaisang placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and said softly, “Da-ge, she’s one of the best physicians in the cultivation world. If anyone can save him its her.” He leaned in a little. “And remember that most of the physicians we know wouldn’t know what to do with a demonic cultivator. Wen Qing has experience.”

Mingjue still felt uncertain, but he could see what little choice they had. He watched dubiously as Wen Qing finished cleaning the wound, pressed a poultice to it and redressed it. She then fixed Mingjue with a firm look and said, “Lie with him for an hour or so and transfer some of your spiritual energy. It will help beat back the infection and encourage the wound to heal.” She looked down at Meng Yao, her expression softening. “He was calling out to you earlier. I think feeling your presence will comfort him.”

Mingjue startled, but he could see her logic and removed Baxia and his overcoat, handing them both to Huaisang. He then climbed onto the palette and lay down on his side, flush with Meng Yao, his heart aching at how small and fragile his body seemed, his feet barely reaching Mingjue's knees laid out. Barely thinking about the other people in the room, Mingjue reached out and brushed Meng Yao's dark hair back from his brow, ignoring the cold sweat, and smiling. This delicate frame belied spiritual strength most cultivators could only dream of having. Meng Yao wouldn't let some faceless Jin cultivator beat him.

Concentrating, Mingjue cupped Meng Yao's face and started pushing his spiritual energy into the other man's body. Meng Yao's face twitched and he made a soft noise, but otherwise remained motionless.

Wen Qing looked on approvingly before turning to Lan Wangji and saying, "You should get some rest Young Master Lan. You've been playing for hours."

Lan Wangji shook his head. "No need."

Mingjue frowned at him and said, "Wangji, she's right. If you've been playing for hours, you'll be exhausted soon. I can keep him stable."

Lan Wangji shook his head again, a set to his jaw that reminded Mingjue of Meng Yao when he was being stubborn. "Wei Ying wanted me to help him, so I will help."

Wen Qing gave the young Lan an exasperated look before throwing up her hands and saying, "As you wish. You won't be my priority patient if you collapse though. I will be back to check on him in half an hour. Call me if he changes."

With that she swept from the room and Mingjue hated to admit that being deprived of her presence made him feel adrift at sea. He felt the blankets shift as Huaisang sat down on the bed and entwined his fingers with Meng Yao's limp ones. They sat in silence for a moment, with nothing but Meng Yao's shallow breaths breaking it. Fear roiled in Mingjue's stomach, so to distract himself he asked, "So. What happened?"

Huaisang's expression soured. "Exactly what I said in my letter. Jin Guangshan made an attempt to wipe out the Wen remnants and imprison Wei Wuxian. Wei Wuxian lost control and tried to attack Jin Zixuan in his madness. Meng Yao intervened and calmed everything down, and that's when he got shot."

"It seems Wei Wuxian had downplayed how serious the situation was," Mingjue said darkly.

"Jin cultivators were watching the Burial Mounds," interject Wangji softly. "Saw Wei Ying leave and thought they could take the Wen remnants without trouble. Didn't know I was coming, or that Wei Ying would return with two more."

Mingjue frowned at him. "Have you sent word to Xichen?"

Wangji nodded, eyes on the strings. "Brother and Master Jiang will come soon."

"And where does Jin Zixuan fit into all this?"

Huaisang let out a humourless laugh. “I don’t envy that man, I must say. He came to try to intervene but was too late. He actually stayed here for the first night to give Yao-ge spiritual energy and stabilised him, but he had to return to Koi Tower to confront his father. We haven’t had any word from him since.”

Once again, Mingjue’s appreciation for that seemingly spoiled brat grew. He had to remember to thank him the next time he saw the brat.

“Da-ge...” Huaisang sighed, his expression pained. “I can’t be sure because it was so chaotic but... I don’t think Yao-ge almost being killed was an accident. I believe one of the cultivators may have taken an opportunity to get in Jin Guangshan’s good books.”

Anger coiled in Mingjue’s gut and it was a struggle to keep his voice down as he gritted out, “Why? How could anyone think this would be the way to earn respect?”

“I wouldn’t doubt that Jin Guangshan wants Yao-ge dead,” said Huaisang matter-of-factly. “He doesn’t like the idea that the Nie Sect, his biggest rival, has a demonic cultivator, and Yao-ge humiliated him when he rejected his offer to join the Jin Sect.”

“Of course he did.” Mingjue felt a little swell of pride in his chest and he smiled down at his advisor. Meng Yao’s face was still deathly pale and unmoving, his lips slightly parted. Worry again seized Mingjue’s heart, but he didn’t let it overwhelm him, instead leaning down to press his forehead against Meng Yao’s temple and murmuring, “You see? Much too strong to let this beat you.”

Huaisang spent the next two days dividing his time between making sure his brother didn’t pass out, Meng Yao didn’t die, and Wei Wuxian didn’t fall into a bottomless pit of despair. For the last task, he was also able to begin plotting the ultimate and necessary downfall of Jin Guangshan by helping Wei Wuxian find a way to spin the story of the Jin attack in a way that would garner sympathy from the other sects.

“The thing is, while we do have three major sects on our side, Jin Guangshan has too many sycophantic Sect Leaders holding onto his every word as the word of heaven,” Huaisang explained as they watched A-Yuan splash around in the make shift, muddy pond the Wens had dug out. “We will be outnumbered in any calls for justice.”

Wei Wuxian laughed darkly. “You mean two major sects. There’s no way the Gusu Lan Sect will side with a demonic cultivator.” His head dipped a little. “Especially not one who lets his friends get hurt because of him.”

Huaisang turned to him slowly just as Lan Wangji came out of the cave. They both turned to him and Wei Wuxian’s bright mask went up as he called, “Ah, Lan Zhan! You’ve finished playing to Yao-ge for today?”

“Will play more tonight,” replied Lan Wangji as he came to stand next to them.

From the pond A-Yuan let out a happy cry and called, “Rich-ge! Can we go and play stick boats in the stream now!”

“Mm.”

“A-Yuan!” chastised Wei Wuxian. He smiled at Lan Wangji and said, “Lan Zhan, you should rest. He can wait a little longer if you’re tired.”

“Want to,” came the simple reply, and he walked over and allowed A-Yuan to stick his muddy little hand in his larger one and pull him towards the trees.

Huaisang looked up at Wei Wuxian and saw he was wearing a look of unbearable sappiness and longing that he decided this needed to stop now. With a sigh he propped his chin on his hand and affected a dreamy tone as he said, “Oh, if only all of us could find a man as charming and kind as that one. My man just kind of shouts a lot.”

Wei Wuxian made a strangled choking noise and spluttered, “What? What do you mean?”

Huaisang smiled gormlessly. “I just mean you’re very lucky A-Xian, getting yourself someone like Lan Wangji. Especially now we know he’s not all about rules and punishment. Though perhaps you like that kind of thing now...”

Wei Wuxian gaped at him for a second longer. “What? No, of course not! Lan Zhan would never-!” He laughed, a strangled, broken sound. “Lan Zhan barely tolerates me!”

Huaisang looked surprised, then smirked. “Oh I see, I’ll play your little game! Of *course* you and Lan Wangji are not *completely* smitten with each other!” Wei Wuxian continued to stare at him and Huaisang hoped his transition from teasing to shock was convincing enough. “You... You really don’t know?”

Wei Wuxian’s expression shuttered. “What is there to know? Lan Zhan has never liked me and that’s that. He’s just a good person.”

Huaisang sighed and shook his head. “Oh my dear, clueless friend. Someone doesn’t hang around the Burial Mounds for days giving large amounts of their spiritual energy to a stranger out of the kindness of their heart.”

The colour drained from Wei Wuxian’s face. “Oh. You’re right. I guess we both got it wrong.” He laughed bitterly. “Lan Zhan must really like Meng Yao, huh?”

Huaisang sprang up and grabbed Wei Wuxian by the face, squeezing his mouth into fish lips. “Look at me and listen good. Stop telling yourself that you are unworthy of being loved.”

Wei Wuxian’s eyes widened, but Huaisang ploughed on. “I know bad things have happened around you. But bad things have happened around all high profile cultivators. That’s what happens when you gain power: others try to take it from you, and that means bad things will happen. But that does not make you a bad person Wei Wuxian. Even with all the things I’ve seen, I have never once thought you were a bad person. And sure you sometimes talk before you think and you have that stupid hero complex, but you are also kind and smart and funny and generous.” He jabbed a finger in the direction of Lan Wangji. “And trust me when I say, that no matter what your flaws are, or what masks you throw up, that man will love you no

matter what.” He yanked Wei Wuxian’s face closer. “So do us all a favour: confront your feelings and don’t spend thirteen years pining after each other.”

He let go and Wei Wuxian gave him a slightly scared look. “But I don’t know-.”

“Talk to him and be open minded. Understand him, and understand his feelings. You don’t have to jump on him immediately. Just don’t dismiss the possibility that there is someone out there who loves you despite your flaws.”

Wei Wuxian stared at him, before giving a minute nod. Without another word he turned and ran in the direction Lan Wangji and A-Yuan had walked off. Huaisang preened a little, hoping he had solved one crisis, when he was distracted by the sound of fast footsteps.

He looked to his left to see Jiang Cheng striding across the makeshift village square towards him, a strange expression on his face. Huaisang smiled and began to say, “Jiang-xiong, I’m glad you could-.”

He cut off when Jiang Cheng reached him and enveloped him in a near crushing embrace. He froze before he heard Jiang Cheng mumbled into his hair, “I heard a Nie Sect cultivator had been hurt and I was so worried that...”

Huaisang lifted his own hands to slowly return the embrace. He couldn’t say anything, as he had never known what it was like to be loved like this.

Mingjue refused to leave Meng Yao’s side until the fourth day, when Huaisang and Wen Qing joined forces and evicted him from the cave to bathe himself. He was vaguely aware of the few visitors they’d had, knowing Jiang Cheng had come at one point and Lan Wangji had received words of concern and support from Xichen, but all his attention was on Meng Yao.

He hadn’t stirred once since Mingjue had gotten to the Burial Mounds, though Wen Qing was insisting he was getting better.

“He’s got colour back in his cheeks and he’s beaten back the infection. The body just needs time to fight these things Master Nie,” the physician had said when he’d asked her for the nth time why he wasn’t waking.

Mingjue himself had reached a state of calmness. He knew Meng Yao would wake up. And he would provide him with all the qi he needed, and murmur about what had happened during the day to him until he did.

And on the fifth day he woke up.

Meng Yao’s vision was blurry when he opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, confusion growing as he realised he was staring at craggy stone above him rather than neat wooden beams and plaster. He tried to move to look around only for a sharp pain to shoot through him, triggering a fit of coughing that only made his chest hurt more.

“Meng Yao!” Suddenly his vision was filled with the face of Nie Mingjue, a mixture of concern and an overwhelming happiness in his expression. “Meng Yao! Can you hear me?”

“Da-ge...” Meng Yao’s voice was croaking and he began to cough again, unable to help the little whimper of pain that escaped his lips afterwards.

“Wen Qing! Wen Qing, he’s awake!” Nie Mingjue boomed, making Meng Yao even more confused.

Wen Qing? Why would Nie Mingjue be in the company of a Wen? And then he remembered.

The Jin cultivators, Wei Wuxian losing control, the arrow...

Suddenly Wen Qing was leaving over him and saying, “Master Meng, don’t try to move or speak. I’ll check your wound.”

The coughing fit subsided and Meng Yao was able to smile a little. It had been almost a year since he had last seen Wen Qing, and she was still a comfort to him. She had been one of the only solid and kind things in the Fire Palace, and somewhere along the line he had begun associating her with safety.

As Wen Qing examined and redressed his wound, Meng Yao’s eyes drifted to Nie Mingjue, who stood on the other side of the bed, watching on concernedly. As his gaze passed over the harsh planes of the sect leader’s face, a warm feeling grew in Meng Yao’s chest.

He remembered floundering in cold darkness barely clinging to who he was, panic clouding his thoughts. He felt as though he were caught in a current, being pulled towards something, something that was akin to resentful energy but all consuming and irreversible. He knew he would lose everything if he went to it, so he tried to pull away, but he was so tired and his limbs were like lead.

Then he had felt strength and warmth seeping into him and the struggle had become easier, he had become lighter, and he could remember who he was, he remembered he had a mother he needed to fight his way back to, friends, family. And as he managed to pull away from the current, he realised the warmth was familiar. It was the scent of pine and tilled earth, a firm hand on his shoulder, safety, *love*...

He smiled at Nie Mingjue and decided that as soon as he was strong enough he would tell this man how he felt, damn the consequences.

“You’ve been unconscious for six days Meng Yao,” said Nie Mingjue, leaning against the bed.

Meng Yao’s eyes widened and Wen Qing snapped in a tone that brokered no argument, “No talking, no moving.”

Both men glanced at her like chastised children before Nie Mingjue continued, “I’m going to tell you not to fret, but you will anyway. Qinghe is well, as is your mother. We have been waiting to make sure it is safe before bringing her here.”

Meng Yao frowned and Nie Mingjue sobered as well. “Jin Guangshan is trying to cover up the situation. I don’t think anyone outside of the four main sects know what actually happened, so it’s causing divisions of loyalty.” He fixed Meng Yao with a sombre look. “Wei Wuxian says at least three people have tried to breach his wards recently, and he believes them to be assassins.”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened as a thought came to him, but Mingjue was quick to assure him, “Your brother and his wife are safe. Huaisang has told me he is the one keeping your father at bay.”

Stepping back, Wen Qing looked between the two of them with a bemused expression. “Did you two form a mind link while transferring energy?” When they both blushed she shook her head and said, “There’s no more infection, but I’ll be keeping a close eye on you, and you need to keep resting.” Meng Yao smiled at her and she turned to Nie Mingjue. “Sect Leader Nie, please transfer some more energy to him after dinner tonight.”

“Of course. And you and your people have my gratitude, Lady Wen.” Meng Yao was thrilled to see there wasn’t a hint of resentment in his words.

Once Wen Qing left, Meng Yao had a stream of visitors. Wei Wuxian came bursting into the room and had to be held back from throwing himself on Meng Yao as he apologised profusely. Huaisang was hot on his heels, and proceeded to melt into a puddle of tears at Meng Yao’s side, babbling apologies and relief through his snot. Meng Yao was able to murmur some assurances but was hyper aware of Wen Qing passing by the doorway sometimes, keeping a suspicious eye on the situation. To his surprise, Jiang Cheng was there too, but he only had a chance to wish him well before saying he needed to go to his sister and in-laws and see what the situation at Koi Tower was like.

Lan Wangji came in a moment later, nodding to Meng Yao and standing a little too close to Wei Wuxian than would be considered proper. He then started fiddling with the ends of Wei Wuxian’s hair as said man continued to emphasise how worried they had all been about Meng Yao. Meng Yao raised an eyebrow at Wei Wuxian, who cut off, glanced at Lan Wangji, and said a little breathlessly, “Ah, yes, well. Some things happened while you were asleep.”

Meng Yao chuckled, but that set off a small coughing fit, so Nie Mingjue forcibly ejected everyone from the room. Meng Yao felt truly blessed to have people who cared about him as much as his friends did, but he could also feel all of his energy leaking out of him by the second. Right now all he wanted was quiet and the presence of the man he loved. He wanted to make the most of Nie Mingjue’s steady presence, knowing that after his confession he probably wouldn’t get to experience it in the same way again.

Over the next few days, Meng Yao got stronger. He was soon able to talk without pain and before long he was sitting up by himself. It took a little longer to convince Wen Qing to allow him to walk around a bit, and he was always supervised for these outings. While he was building up his strength Huaisang and the others brought him up to speed about the situation with the Jin Sect.

“We will have to reach out to them soon. Get a diplomatic conversation going,” said Meng Yao as he sipped a bitter herbal concoction Wen Qing had given him. “However, we shouldn’t go to any meetings without members from Gusu Lan and Yunmeng Jiang present.”

“Meetings? Diplomacy?” said Nie Mingjue incredulously. “Meng Yao, they *shot* you. That Jin bastard wants you dead. We are beyond politeness at this point.”

“I agree with Chifeng-zun,” said Wei Wuxian darkly from his bedside chair. “Besides, they wanted to slaughter all the people here without trial. Innocent people. *Children.*”

“I understand you’re feelings, but this meeting isn’t about politeness. It’s about our survival,” said Meng Yao firmly. “Think about it. Neither us nor our allied Sects have recovered from the Sunshot Campaign yet, whilst Lanling Jin is so wealthy that even if they had taken heavy blows they would have been able to sail through.” He fixed Nie Mingjue with a sober look. “We have neither the resources nor morale to go to war again so soon, Sect Leader.”

Nie Mingjue hesitated, but then Huaisang said softly, “He’s right, da-ge.”

Nie Mingjue let out an irritated huff and said, “Fine. I will write to Jin Zixuan and see if we can set up a meeting. Don’t blame me if this goes sour.”

“I will accept full responsibility Sect Leader Nie,” replied Meng Yao.

Nie Mingjue gave him an exasperated but fond look and said, “You should rest now. I will write the missive. And I will write home as well. Tell them to be ready.”

Meng Yao frowned. “I feel fine. All I’ve been doing is resting!”

“Yes, but rest helps the healing process. Don’t be silly and just focus on getting better, okay Yao-ge?” said Wei Wuxian with a grin.

Meng Yao looked nonplussed and turned to Lan Wangji. “Young Master Lan, is he one to talk?”

Lan Wangji shook his head, eliciting a gasp from Wei Wuxian and a smug smile from Meng Yao. Everyone decided to let him rest however, and started filing out of the room, but before Huaisang could leave Meng Yao grabbed his sleeve. “Can I have a moment of your time Huaisang?”

The young man blinked gormlessly and nodded, perching on the edge of the bed. Meng Yao waited until the others had left before saying, “I know this seems silly Huaisang, but... before I got shot, I remember the fear in your voice when Wen Ning was charging towards the Jins. Towards my brother. I... From what I heard, I cannot help but wonder... did you have some idea of what was going to happen?”

Huaisang gave him a long look, a dark depth coming into his eyes that Meng Yao had only ever seen glimpses of before. However, he didn’t back down, holding the young man’s gaze, and eventually Huaisang sighed and replied, “I don’t know if da-ge’s ever told you this before but... when I was younger I had prophetic dreams. And I had one dream of the future

that haunts me to this day.” Meng Yao raised his eyebrows. “It’s part of the reason I took you and your mother out of the brothel when we did, actually. Because I saw what would happen if you were left there. If your father got his claws into you.”

Meng Yao hesitated before asking. “And… what were the things you saw?”

“You murdered da-ge for one thing,” said Huaisang flatly. “And many others.”

Meng Yao flinched, his stomach dropping out. That idea seemed preposterous. All he wanted to do now was protect Nie Mingjue. He would die for him. But then he remembered the insidious ambition and resentment that had been slowly building inside him before he went to Qinghe, and suddenly the idea didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility.

“I also saw your brother die by Wen Ning’s hand when Wei Wuxian lost control,” Huaisang continued. “And I know that if that ever happens again… only bad things will follow.” Meng Yao stared at him, half stunned, half uncertain, and Huaisang smiled. “That future has been avoided Yao-ge, so don’t worry about it. Just focus on this one, okay?”

With that Huaisang stood up and left the room, leaving Meng Yao with his thoughts and a thousand questions.

The first missive to come from Lanling was from Jin Zixuan, and was clearly unofficial correspondence. Huaisang brought it directly to Meng Yao, who opened the letter and read the hastily scrawled text inside.

Happy to hear you are recovering. Trying to get father to cooperate. Unwilling. He’s sending a delegation in two days to negotiate. Jiang Cheng might be with them, unsure. Don’t back down and don’t trust them.

Jin Zixuan

Meng Yao chuckled to himself before turning to the others and saying, “It seems we’ll be receiving visitors soon to discuss the next steps. Sect Leader Jiang may be with them but that’s not for certain.”

“I certainly wouldn’t count on it,” said Huaisang with a lopsided smile. “We should know by now that Jin Guangshan is above nothing when it comes to seizing power.”

“Treacherous snake. When are we to expect these cowards?” asked Nie Mingjue, folding his arms.

“Two days.”

“Good!” chirped Wei Wuxian before turning to Lan Wangji. “Do you think your brother can get here by then?”

Lan Wangji shrugged. “Perhaps. Maybe shortly after.”

“And if I rest a lot before then I should be able to attend the meeting,” said Meng Yao.

“I strongly advise against that,” said Wen Qing, who had been hovering by the door with her brother. “I wouldn’t advise walking up and down the mountain at a slow pace, let alone into a dangerous situation like this.”

Meng Yao gave her a tired smile and said, “Lady Wen, I have to be there.”

“Do you? Really?” Her expression was unmoved.

“He does, actually,” said Huaisang with a timid smile. “He’s the one with the silver tongue after all, and I’d be much more comfortable having him there if Xichen-ge can’t make it.”

Wen Qing lip curled slightly before she snapped, “Fine. But my brother will be carrying you around.”

Nie Mingjue and Wei Wuxian snorted as Meng Yao looked incensed. Wen Ning, who stood by his sister’s side, had the decency to look guilty. “What? But I-.”

“If you want to go to this meeting you have to sacrifice your health or your dignity, and I refuse to let you completely sacrifice your health.” Her eyes flashed as she produced a needle seemingly from midair. “Alternatively, I could induce a coma and *force* you to not be reckless.”

Meng Yao hesitated before he managed to swallow his pride and nodded. His alleged friends couldn’t stop chuckling.

They received confirmation of the meeting through an official Jin source a day later. The Jins wanted to meet at the mouth of the path into the Burial Mounds, and after much grumbling Nie Mingjue and Wei Wuxian they both signed the agreement and sent it off.

“I can handle being in the place I was shot, da-ge,” said Meng Yao after Nie Mingjue had expressed his concern. “Don’t know if I can say the same about getting shot again though.”

It didn’t elicit the light hearted reaction he’d hoped for. Nie Mingjue’s frown deepened and he said quietly, “Don’t joke about that.”

Meng Yao blinked. “Da-ge, I’m fi-.”

“You almost died Meng Yao,” Nie Mingjue interrupted. “When I arrived here, you looked like you were dead. And those bastards might try to kill you again. And I- I couldn’t stand that.”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened a little, but before he could say anything Nie Mingjue turned and walked away, muttering something about needing to train. Meng Yao stared at the space he had been standing, unsure whether the feeling in his chest was light or heavy.

Their odd assortment of various cultivators arrived at the mouth of the path before the Jin cultivators, which Mingjue supposed was good for Meng Yao's dignity. He watched with a flicker of amusement as Wen Ning set his advisor down, immediately jumping out of sight afterwards, and Meng Yao stepped away awkwardly, brushing down his borrowed black robes. Ordering more in from Qinghe had slipped their minds, and Meng Yao's had been covered in blood so Wei Wuxian had offered up some of his. Seeing his advisor half floundering in the oversized robes was, dare he say, cute, but some jealous part of him wished it as his robes Meng Yao was borrowing.

He was quickly distracted by these thoughts as three figures in golden robes descended on their swords. It seemed that Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan had been unable to escape Jin Guangshan's clutches. When the eldest of the three men stepped off his sword, he immediately kowtowed to their group and said, "Sect Leader Nie. We thank you and your associates for meeting with us."

Mingjue responded with a short nod, unsmiling. The man was clearly a Jin, with brown hair shot through with grey and a foxy face, a vermillion mark adorning his brow. He also kowtowed to Lan Wangji and Huaisang, but his eyes merely flickered once to Wei Wuxian and he didn't show any sign of acknowledging Meng Yao's presence. It irked Mingjue, but relieved him that he didn't have to hold any respect towards these people.

"My name is Jin Zihao," continued the man. "I am Sect Leader Jin's representative on this matter."

"Why didn't he come himself?" snapped Mingjue.

Jin Zihao dipped his head and replied, "Due to the nature of the situation, Sect Leader Jin and his advisors deemed it would not be prudent to be in attendance for his safety. He means no disrespect, but a man of his position-."

"I am a Sect Leader as well, and here I stand," said Mingjue, eyes narrowed. "Besides, this whole mess was caused by *your* people."

Jin Zihao gave him a tight smile. "Yes, we are aware that there were... mistakes made by our disciples. And unfortunately, because of this, Sect Leader Jin was afraid of retaliation. However, as there wasn't any lasting harm done, Sect Leader Jin also has faith that this can be settled amicably."

"*No lasting harm?*" snarled Mingjue, taking a step forward, Baxia thrumming in her sheath. "Your people nearly *killed* my advisor."

The Jin cultivators all tensed, fear flashing across their faces, but suddenly a gentle hand caught Mingjue's arm. He looked down to see Meng Yao at his side, and when their gazes met his advisor shook his head.

Mingjue hesitated for a moment before backing down, and Meng Yao said to the Jins, "We are willing to negotiate. I'm sure nobody wants another conflict. What are Sect Leader Jin's propositions?"

Jin Zihao looked at Meng Yao like he was something unpleasant found in the mud, rankling Mingjue, but replied coolly, “He wants Wei Wuxian to hand over the Stygian Tiger Amulet and for the Wen remnants to be returned to Jin custody to serve out the rest of their sentences. He assures their wellbeing.”

“Not happening,” snapped Wei Wuxian, glaring. “I will never give someone as power-hungry as your Sect Leader the amulet. And tell me, how long will the Wens sentences be exactly? Life in a labour camp? For the elderly and the disabled and children, life imprisonment simply for being born with a certain name.”

“They are the enemy. It is only right that they are punished for-.”

“Wen Ruohan and his soldiers were our enemies. These people have done nothing but live peacefully!”

“Forgive me Jin Zihao, but your terms are unacceptable to us,” interrupted Meng Yao, cutting off the rising tension. “However, we are willing to negotiate other terms with Sect Leader Jin.” The man fixed Meng Yao with a cold stare, who returned it with amicability. “In person with the Sect Leader, of course. And we would like representatives from the Gusu Lan Sect and Yunmeng Jiang Sect to be present. For mediation’s sake.”

Jin Zihao let out a short, unamused laugh. “I don’t see why the other major sects must be dragged into an issue that lies between Lanling Jin and Qinghe Nie.” He turned and smiled at Lan Wangji. “Young Master Lan, surely Sect Leader Lan is far too busy to-.”

“I have written to brother. He wishes to be in attendance,” said Lan Wangji flatly.

Shock and apprehension flew across Jin Zihao’s face and Mingjue silently thanked Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan for not telling anyone this little fact so he could see a reaction. There was a beat of silence as Jin Zihao swallowed, mulling over their words. Then he composed himself and said, “I see. Well, I suppose it is unavoidable now. I am sure Sect Leader Jin will be willing to meet.” He glanced around at their rough surroundings, his lip curling again. “Though you may be asked to meet in more... civilised quarters.”

“We will be happy to hold the conference at Koi Tower,” said Meng Yao with a bright smile. Mingjue turned to him incredulous, and saw his feelings mirrored on Wei Wuxian’s face. Mingjue started to protest but his mouth snapped shut at the warning look Meng Yao gave him.

Jin Zihao nodded stiffly. “Very well. We shall take your terms to Sect Leader Jin.”

They were moving to leave, so Mingjue glared at them and snapped, “Make it very clear to your Sect Leader that I will be expecting recompense for his people attacking one of my own.”

Jin Zihao paused as he climbed on his sword, then nodded and kowtowed. “Of course, Sect Leader Nie. Please expect to hear from us shortly.”

With that they were gone, flying off over the tree tops and out of sight. Mingjue waited to make sure they were really gone before rounding on Meng Yao and demanding, “Why did you agree to meet at Koi Tower? You *know* it will be a trap!”

Meng Yao was calm as he met his gaze. “Not if we send someone ahead to make sure Jin Guangshan won’t try anything.” His gaze went to Lan Wangji. “Young Master Lan...”

Lan Wangji nodded and said, “I will write to brother again. He will get there early.”

Meng Yao dipped his head in thanks, but Wei Wuxian muttered, “Even so, I don’t like it. Why didn’t you ask to meet somewhere more neutral?”

“Because Jin Guangshan would never agree to that,” said Huaisang. “He’d kick up a big fuss to the other smaller sects about us trying to exact revenge on him in an unprotected location and sway more people to his side. And now that he knows the Jiangs and Lans will be intervening, he’ll try to put this to rest with diplomacy. There is some prudence in that jewelled head of his after all.”

Mingjue and Wei Wuxian exchanged a look, but before they could continue arguing Meng Yao took a step towards Mingjue only to suck in a short breath and wince. Concern immediately superseded Mingjue’s frustration and he caught Meng Yao gently by the arm, asking, “What’s wrong? Is it your wound?”

Meng Yao smiled. “Yes, but it’s not bad. It just hurts when I move too quickly.”

“Wen Ning!” called Wei Wuxian, and the young man jumped down from the tree tops. “Take Yao-ge back to the cave. Make sure he gets to bed before your sister yells at us.”

“Yes Young Master,” murmured Wen Ning. He then turned towards Meng Yao and seemed to wilt a little. “I’m sorry Master Meng, but...”

Meng Yao sighed and said, “I suppose my dignity is already dead. Let’s go.”

Wen Ning picked up the young man and dashed off towards the caves. Mingjue was quick to follow, knowing Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji would get Huaisang safely back to the wards. By the time he got back to the caves Meng Yao was already settling back onto his palette, Wen Ning leaving with a bow.

Mingjue walked up to the palette frowning down at his advisor, who gave him a tired smile. “I know you’re annoyed.”

“Then why did you do that?” Mingjue demanded.

“Da-ge, I just explained,” pleaded Meng Yao. “I know you’re worried, but we will have Lan Xichen’s support, and Yunmeng Jiang’s. Additionally, you should give my brother and Young Lady Jiang some credit. I doubt they will make it easy for the Jins to lay a trap.”

Mingjue was silent for a second, still dubious, before he sighed. “I know. I don’t like it though. I don’t like you being in danger.”

“Thank you for your concern da-ge. But look on the bright side. We just have to get through this and then we can return home. I don’t know about you but I’m certainly looking forward to sleeping in a bedroom without drafts and damp in it.”

Mingjue let out a short laugh and the lapsed into a weighted silence. Mingjue looked at his advisor, who was picking at the hem of his sheets and worrying his bottom lip. He thought of the Unclean Realm, of the garden, of how he had become increasingly aware of how lonely his chambers felt. A fervent wish rose in him suddenly, and he thought of not having to bid farewell to Meng Yao each night in the garden or in the studies they worked from, instead getting to climb into bed with him and kiss him goodnight, falling asleep with Meng Yao’s warmth by his side. After these past few days of doing exactly that, he didn’t want to return to those empty sheets.

A reckless bravery spilled over and he blurted out, “Meng Yao, I have to tell you something,” just as Meng Yao said, “Da-ge, I must speak with you.”

They both blinked at each other before laughing, Meng Yao saying, “You go first da-ge.”

Mingjue swallowed heavily before saying, “I- I want you to know that you have no obligation to... to reciprocate what I am about to say. And if you are too uncomfortable because of it, I will not begrudge you if you wish to take a role somewhere else in the Sect.”

Fear flashed through Meng Yao’s eyes before his face shuttered, and Mingjue almost backed away then, spoken about something else... but then he thought of how frail Meng Yao had looked, how Mingjue had thought he’d lose him... and they could be walking into a similar situation soon, so he couldn’t walk away from this.

And so, taking a deep breath, he admitted, “I have feelings for you.”

Meng Yao’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped, so Mingjue ploughed on, “For some time now I have felt things for you that are... not appropriate for me to feel towards one of my subordinates. But I refuse to hide from them any longer, and I refuse to lie about them.” He lifted his chin to lock gazes with Meng Yao. “I love you. You are intelligent, you are efficient and funny and kind, and I love you for all those things. And please do not feel any obligation to reciprocate my feelings. All I want is your happiness, and if this makes you uncomfortable I understand, and I will find you a new place to-.”

Meng Yao leaned forward and kissed him.

It was a chaste brushing of dry lips, like the fleeting kisses lovers exchanged farewells with. And yet it set Mingjue’s heart racing, and when Meng Yao started to pull away Mingjue chased him.

But the young man raised his hand, cool, featherlight fingertips stopping Mingjue in his tracks. Meng Yao was smiling a warmth in his eyes unlike anything Mingjue had ever seen in him before.

“I hadn’t dared to hope...” Meng Yao murmured. “I never thought you could have returned my feelings. I... I cannot describe the joy I am feeling. But... you are a Sect Leader. And I

am...”

“Perfect for me,” said Mingjue swiftly, reaching up to clasp that slender hand in his own. He marvelled at the delicacy of it, at the strength he felt as those fingers wove with his own.

“A prostitute’s son and a demonic cultivator,” said Meng Yao with a breathy laugh. “So this cannot-.”

Mingjue kissed Meng Yao this time, lingering and full of heat. He cupped Meng Yao’s jaw, tracing its line with his finger and making a fire burn in the pit of his stomach as he felt Meng Yao shiver. With all his will he pulled back to stare into his golden eyes, saying firmly, “I don’t care about that anymore. And I certainly don’t care about what others think. I love you Meng Yao, your soul, your body, everything. I want everything you are willing to give me, and I want to give you the same in return. I want to keep you safe and have you by my side. I need you A-Yao.”

Meng Yao’s gasp was soft and then they were kissing again. This time it was deep and fiery. Meng Yao parted his lips and Mingjue plunged forward, sweeping his tongue into his mouth, tasting him, revelling in him. Meng Yao’s arms came around Mingjue’s neck as he pushed himself to his knees on the bed, using Mingjue as a support, his finger running through Mingjue’s hair. Mingjue in return wrapped one arm around Meng Yao’s back and trailed the other down the curve of his spine to rest above the swell of his ass, aware that the cave didn’t have a door on it.

Unfortunately, Meng Yao seemed to pick up on his hesitation and broke the kiss, giggling as he said, “We should stop. There are children around.”

Mingjue groaned and buried his face in Meng Yao’s hair, muttering, “So long I’ve been thinking of this, and now you’re in my arms and we are in a *cave* with no *privacy*.”

Meng Yao laughed again, breathless, before he said, “Patience, da-ge. I’m sure we can both wait a little longer. We have plenty of time now.” He leaned down and nipped the shell of Mingjue’s ear. “And once we return to Qinghe, we can do whatever we want.”

Mingjue leaned back, trying his best to look stern. “You little vixen. Keep that up and I won’t care about our image.” He softened as he cupped Meng Yao’s face again, a surge of affection nearly overwhelming him. “My dearest, loveliest A-Yao. I am yours if you are mine.”

“I am yours,” whispered Meng Yao, practically glowing as he flowed into Nie Mingjue’s embrace. “For as long as we have left, I am yours.”

And to Nie Mingjue, the world seemed brighter.

Chapter End Notes

And on the eighteenth day, the author said LET THEM HAVE FLUFF AND RESOLVED ROMANTIC TENSION. Hope you enjoy this one! Sorry it's just kind of fillery, I'm a bit unhappy with it and I meant for more to happen but... yeah, I just needed to get this one out to you lovely people. At least we got that NieYao, right?

ALL the action happens in the next chapter, which may be the finale. Or that one will also get similarly unwieldy and I will have to split it. Anyway, thank you all so much for reading and commenting!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The sky was aptly dark and grey as their group arrived at Koi Tower. In the two weeks it had taken for Meng Yao to recover enough for the conference, the weather had truly begun its shift into autumn and the air held a chill. But the natural chill was nothing compared to the one wafted from the Jin cultivators watching them ascend the tower stairs. Their gazes were like those of a waiting predator, watching for a moment of weakness.

Even though his wound still twinged slightly as he walked, Meng Yao held his head high and kept pace with Nie Mingjue's long strides. He wished they could be arm in arm, showing their unified strength as cultivation partners, and he could feel Mingjue's desire for the same thing. But neither of them wanted to give Jin Guangshan anything more to use against them, so they had made the decision to stay discreet until they were safely back in the Unclean Realm.

When they neared the top of the stairs, there was a sudden whirl of black robes as Wei Wuxian shot past them. Meng Yao followed his friend's path and smiled as he watched Wei Wuxian engulf his sister in a hug. Jiang Yanli had been waiting for them with her brother, husband, and Lan Xichen at the top of the stairs. Once the rest of them caught up, they kowtowed to each other and Meng Yao heard Jiang Yanli saying, "A-Xian, women would go mad if they had to stay confined for the entire time. I have plenty of time before being tucked away."

She smiled over her brother's shoulder at Meng Yao, who dipped his head in return, but he was quickly distracted by Jin Zixuan stepping towards him. His brother had a vaguely strangled expression on his face and his voice was strained as he said, "Meng Yao, I... I am very glad to see you're doing better."

Meng Yao smiled at him in return. "Thank you, Young Master. And allow me to express my gratitude for helping me after the incident. Young Lady Wen told me that without the spiritual energy you gave me I probably would have died."

Jin Zixuan nodded before blurting out, "You can call me A-Xuan." Meng Yao blinked and Jin Zixuan flushed further. "If you want to. We- We are brothers after all."

Meng Yao felt his own cheeks heat before he murmured, "Thank you, A-Xuan. And... you can call me A-Yao, if you'd like."

Beside him Mingjue snorted and said, "Qinghe Nie owes you a great debt for saving this one, Young Master Jin. As do I. However, perhaps we should put this whole affair to bed before wallowing in sentimentality."

Meng Yao raised an eyebrow at his partner and Jin Zixuan's blush deepened dangerously, but they were saved the awkwardness by Lan Xichen approaching them. "You should give them

some time to reacquaint, da-ge. A lot had happened and they haven't been able to speak about it."

"Xichen. Thank you for coming," greeted Mingjue, smiling at his friend.

Meng Yao began to kowtow, his wound twinging slightly, but once more Lan Xichen caught him by the arms before he could complete the movement. "Meng Yao, none of that. And I am glad to see you have recovered. I must admit, I was worried when I received my brother's letter informing me of your injuries."

Meng Yao nodded. "I have much to thank Young Master Lan for."

They glanced towards Lan Wangji, who was standing next to Wei Wuxian and looking on impassively in the face of the Jiang siblings' narrow gazes. Jiang Cheng wasn't bothering to hide his hostile scrutiny, whilst Jiang Yanli had a more tender look about her. But Meng Yao could see the steel in her eyes and by the nervous shuffle of Wei Wuxian's feet, he could guess what was being discussed.

Lan Xichen's brow furrowed slightly, and he said, "Wangji seems nervous. I wonder what's happening?"

"I would speak to him privately later," said Meng Yao with a small smile.

Lan Xichen nodded before his expression sobered and he said, "As far as I can tell, we are safe at this meeting. Hopefully this means Sect Leader Jin is genuine in his desire for peace."

Meng Yao shot an uneasy look at Jin Zixuan but his brother was unfazed. "I have ensured your safety here. I swear my father won't try anything."

Resigned but not entirely convinced, Meng Yao glanced at Mingjue, who nodded and said, "Let's get started then."

As per usual with visiting dignitaries, their little group was taken to the main audience hall. Jin Guangshan had the dignity to tone down the opulence in the hall for such a serious occasion, with only a few simply peony banners hung as decoration. Standing to the sides of the hall were the numerous, bottom feeding Sect Leaders that gravitated towards Jin wealth, as well as plenty of Jin cultivators. Madam Jin was at her husband's side, glaring at them, and beside her stood Jin Zixun, the yellow remnants of a bruise marring his face.

Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli moved to stand on Jin Guangshan's other side, whilst Mingjue, Lan Xichen and Jiang Cheng stepped forward to take their positions of prominence in front of the Jin throne dais. Wei Wuxian had the wherewithal to hang back with Meng Yao, Huaisang and Lan Wangji. Jin Guangshan rose from his seat and the Sect Leaders bowed to each other whilst the rest of them kowtowed. Cursory greetings over, Jin Guangshan announced, "Welcome, my esteemed guests. I am glad to have you here, though I wish it were under better circumstances. Shall we do away with the niceties and get down to business?"

"Please," grumbled Mingjue.

Jin Guangshan sat down again with a heavy sigh and said, “From my understanding, you found our terms disagreeable, Sect Leader Nie?”

“Entirely,” replied Mingjue shortly.

Jin Guangshan grimaced and said, “Forgive me if this is too bold Sect Leader, but I must ask why you and your advisor became involved in the first place? As far as I could tell, this matter lay between the Jin Sect and Wei Wuxian. And the Jiang Sect by extension, of course.”

Wei Wuxian made a derisive noise and Meng Yao quickly laid a hand on his arm, shaking his head. Thankfully, Wei Wuxian’s anger subsided, especially after Lan Wangji linked his hand with Wei Wuxian’s on the other side. Now was not the time for outbursts.

“Advisor Meng knew some of the Wen Sect members your people were tormenting personally. He knew the only crime they committed was bearing the Wen tyrant’s name, and so we decided to act to defend the innocent.” Mingjue’s voice turned icy in a second. “And then, while my advisor was defending those innocent people, your disciples tried to kill him.”

Whispers ran through the crowd around them as Jin Guangshan replied coolly, “I assure you Sect Leader Nie, the Jin Sect had no intention to try to kill Advisor Meng. It was an unfortunate accident that rose from an entirely preventable situation that had run out of control.”

“And how would you have proposed the situation be prevented?” snapped Mingjue.

Jin Guangshan was unfazed. “Had Wei Wuxian been more willing to cooperate with us-.”

“I wasn’t going to let you slaughter innocent people!” snapped Wei Wuxian, eyes flashing. He ignored both Meng Yao and Jiang Cheng’s sharp looks and continued, “And let me make this very clear: I will *never* give you the Stygian Tiger Amulet, because the last thing this world needs is another Wen Ruohan.”

There was instant uproar from the sycophants, and even the sects more loyal to Qinghe narrowed their eyes at the insult. Meng Yao wanted to bury his face in his hands and Mingjue and Jiang Cheng looked like they may throttle the demonic cultivator, but Wei Wuxian was unperturbed, glaring at Jin Guangshan.

However, as Meng Yao looked around the room at the less blindly loyal Sect Leaders, he saw a fair share of uncertain faces. He suddenly realised that perhaps the Qinghe Nie Sect and its loyalists were not the only ones to be concerned about Jin Guangshan’s growing influence.

Taking a deep breath he stepped forward and called over the din, “Gentlemen, please, let us all calm down and discuss this civilly!”

It became clear that no one was listening to him, that was until Mingjue boomed in a voice like thunder, “Everybody quiet!”

That did the trick and dead silence fell over the hall. Meng Yao smiled appreciatively at Mingjue before inclining his head to Jin Guangshan and saying, “Sect Leader Jin, please forgive Young Master Wei’s words. The situation at the Burial Mounds took a deep emotional toll on him. I am sure you understand his... tension.”

Jin Guangshan gave him a cold stare that may have intimidated him once. “Indeed. Advisor Meng, I suppose we must also discuss the unfortunate injury dealt to you by disciples from my sect. Let me assure you it was merely an unfortunate accident, and we are willing to pay any compensation price you wish for.”

Drowning yourself would be a start, thought Meng Yao, but outwardly he affected a modest smile, bowed and said, “That Sect Leader Jin acknowledges the wrong dealt to me is more than enough compensation. More than anything I wish to move past this incident and make peace between our sects.”

Jin Guangshan nodded, nonplussed. Beside him Madam Jin and Jin Zixuan looked displeased, though he presumed for entirely different reasons, but before he could consider the matter settled, Mingjue stepped forward.

“My advisor may be satisfied with that, but I am not. I want proper discipline to be dealt to those responsible for his injury.” His hard gaze turned on Jin Zixun, who shrivelled like a salted slug. “Starting with the coward responsible for the attack.”

Jin Guangshan regarded Mingjue and Jin Zixun with a calculating look. Eventually he sighed and said, “Very well, Sect Leader Nie. Jin Zixun will be forbidden from any further Night Hunts or conference competitions, and the other men will be corporally punished. Is this agreeable to you?”

Mingjue nodded curtly. “Yes.”

“Uncle, please-!” Jin Zixun began to splutter but was silenced by his Sect Leader’s frigid look.

“I will hear no more from you. You have disgraced our Sect, and will face according punishment. Get out of my sight.”

Jin Zixun hesitated before a dark expression stole over him and he stormed away, shooting one last poisonous glare at Meng Yao as he went. Jin Zixuan watched him go coldly, whilst Madam Jin looked furious, barely containing an outburst. He brushed past the assembled Sect Leaders and straight through the crowd gathered behind them, bumping into Huaisang and making him stagger. Meng Yao frowned and he felt Mingjue tense, but the young Nie quickly waved a placating hand at them.

“Of course, in other matters, we will *all* need to come to an agreement in order to reach peace,” said Jin Guangshan, tilting his head.

Meng Yao smiled and said, “Why of course. But Sect Leader, I believe in order to do that we must first acknowledge what the whole conflict is really about.”

Jin Guangshan narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“The position of Chief Cultivator is still open, and Sect Leader Jin’s actions indicate he wishes to raise his chances of filling said position.”

Whispers broke out once more. Meng Yao was unwavering as Jin Guangshan glared down at him, ignoring the questioning looks he was receiving from his son. Eventually a languid smile stretched his feature and he replied, “That is *not* the reason for my actions, but I must confess it has been on my mind. After all, we need order in our world, and instating a Chief Cultivator will be the final step in healing from the Sunshot Campaign.”

“And I suppose you’re the perfect fit for the role?” drawled Mingjue.

Jin Guangshan arched his eyebrow. “I would never presume to merely insert myself into the role-.”

There was a strange wheezing sound behind Meng Yao and he glanced over his shoulder in time to see Huaisang’s elbow snapping back to his body and Wei Wuxian rubbing his ribs and frowning.

“But the Jin Sect has been in a fortuitous and prosperous position since the war, and so we now have many circumstances surrounding us that favour our election to the head Sect,” said Jin Guangshan casually.

“Here, here!” shouted someone from the gathered crowd and there was a rumble of affirmation.

However, before any of the major Sect Leaders could contribute anything, someone else shouted from the other side of the room, “Qinghe Nie Sect deserves the position just as much!”, and there was another roll of affirmative voices.

Meng Yao and Mingjue exchanged a pained look. Whilst it was flattering to have such support, they both knew Mingjue wasn’t cut out for such a position of power in the peace time. He wanted to lead his sect and no one else’s. That being said, if it was a means to prevent Jin Guangshan from gaining power, perhaps they could work out a temporary arrangement.

“Please, everyone,” interjected Lan Xichen, his soft voice having the desire effect of cutting through the rising tension of the hall. “While this is an important matter that we must discuss, I do not believe now is the wisest time to hold such an election. Such topics need to be contemplated at length and no one has had a chance to do so.”

“I agree,” said Mingjue, nodding at Lan Xichen. He then looked towards Jin Guangshan and continued, “I’m sure the Sect Leader can put us up for another night to give us time to mull things over.”

Jin Guangshan dipped his head in acquiescence, a cocky smile playing at the corners of his mouth. His eyes then slewed to Jiang Cheng and he asked, “Sect Leader Jiang, what say you to this? Do you wish to put yourself forward as a candidate for leadership as well?”

Jiang Cheng frowned and replied, “Of course not. I understand that I am too young and inexperienced a Sect Leader for such a position, and I must focus on the healing of my own Sect.” He lifted his chin, eyes flashing. “That being said, I don’t think you or Sect Leader Nie should be Chief Cultivator. Sect Leader Lan should be.”

There was a stunned silence, then the hall erupted with voices. Jiang Yanli raised her arm to cover her mouth as she laughed, looking fondly down at her brother. Lan Xichen was gaping at Jiang Cheng and Meng Yao suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder as Wei Wuxian muttered in his ear, “If this happens, do you think Old Man Lan can hit Jin Guangshan with the discipline paddle?”

Meng Yao laughed and replied, “Maybe. He’d probably want to hit you as well though.”

Wei Wuxian scowled at that and retreated, and by that time the hall had quietened again.

“Sect Leader Jiang,” said Lan Xichen, his composure regained. “I appreciate your faith in me, but I don’t believe I am the most qualified person to accept such a position.”

Jiang Cheng lifted his chin again, his gaze stubborn. “All Sects in the cultivation world have entrusted the Gusu Lan Sect with the education of generations of children. I’d say over half the people here have had an education in the Cloud Recesses. They are disciplined, and fair, and have the most intimate knowledge of how to maintain balance in the cultivation world. And Sect Leader Lan, you were the one who rallied the hundreds of remaining members of the sects the Wen Dogs had destroyed, including my own. You are one of the primary reasons we had a united force during the Sunshot Campaign. So forgive me for being so blunt in my disagreement, but I think you are *overly* qualified for this position.”

Lan Xichen opened his mouth and closed it before glancing towards his brother. To Meng Yao, Lan Wangji seemed as stone faced as ever, but the older Lan must have seen something encouraging there because he said, “I will have to think on the matter. But if others believe that this is the best way for me to help...”

Meng Yao and Mingjue exchanged another look and Meng Yao shrugged. He agreed with Jiang Cheng on the matter, and he doubted there was anyone else aside from Mingjue he would want in the role.

“Yes, you have certainly given us all much to think about, Sect Leader Jiang,” said Jin Guangshan, tone clipped. “Perhaps it would be best for us to call it a day here and... deliberate the matter privately.”

“So we are voting on the matter of Chief Cultivator tomorrow?” cut in Meng Yao, keeping his expression amicable.

Jin Guangshan paused then gave a short nod. “If that is what it takes to resolve this mess then so be it.”

Meng Yao inclined his head and the meeting was dismissed. Lan Xichen came over to speak with Mingjue and Meng Yao, smiling sheepishly as he said, “I’m afraid Sect Leader Jiang has put me in a difficult position.”

“You are more than worthy of the office Xichen,” said Mingjue, smiling. “More deserving than anyone else.”

“Ah, but da-ge, I thought that you would be-.”

“Nonsense. You know how impatient I am. I’d be rubbish,” said Mingjue, waving a hand.

Meng Yao nodded in agreement as Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli came to join them, Jin Zixuan frowning at Meng Yao. “I am beginning to suspect you *want* father to murder you in your sleep.”

Meng Yao laughed and said, “Sometimes we must force our opponent’s hand.”

“Peacock, what strings do I need to pull to make sure Sect Leader Lan gets elected tomorrow?” demanded Wei Wuxian, looking murderous as he stomped up to them.

Jin Zixuan looked somewhat taken aback and replied, “Well… I will do my best to make sure people are swayed….”

“But I need that guaranteed!” snapped Wei Wuxian, a quavering note behind his anger.
“Because if he does come to power-.”

“A-Xian.” Jiang Yanli laid a gentle hand on her brother’s arm and the soothing effect was immediate. “It’s alright. We won’t let anything happen to your friends. I promise.” She glanced towards the Jin servants hovering nearby and grimaced. “Stay close to my quarters tonight A-Xian, okay?”

Wei Wuxian nodded and Meng Yao turned to Lan Xichen, saying, “We will retire now, but you should come to dine with us tonight, Sect Leader Lan. We should discuss our plan for tomorrow.” Lan Xichen nodded and Meng Yao turned to Mingjue, only to pause when he saw his Sect Leader frowning around the room. “Sect Leader? What’s wrong?”

“Where did Huaisang go?” asked Mingjue, an edge to his voice.

Meng Yao frowned and looked around, alarm beginning to grow when he realised the younger Nie brother was nowhere to be found. However, before his worry could truly set in, Lan Wangji approached them and said, “Young Master Nie went to the gardens. Sect Leader Jiang followed him.”

Meng Yao’s shoulders sagged a little as Mingjue huffed and muttered, “That kid, I swear. Not one ounce of common sense. I should go fetch him.”

Meng Yao shook his head and said, “He’ll be fine Sect Leader. Sect Leader Jiang is quite fond of him, so I doubt he will let anything happen.”

“I’ll tell the servants to keep an eye out so they can get him safely to his quarters,” said Jin Zixuan.

Meng Yao dipped his head gratefully then beckoned Mingjue towards the awaiting servants. As they walked Mingjue murmured, “You seem awfully eager to get to our quarters. I don’t

blame you, it will be the most privacy we've had since..."

Meng Yao struggled to keep his grin contained as he slapped Mingjue's hand away, grateful for his voluminous robes. "No, if they come to assassinate us, I want at least some of my dignity in tact."

He hesitated as they fell into step with the servants before saying softly, "I-I would like to ward your rooms though. And Huaisang's. Wei-di taught me some of his wards before we left and... well, the people here will be less likely to know how to undo them."

Mingjue frowned and Meng Yao almost took back his words, only for his Sect Leader to nod and say, "Very well. So long as you don't strain yourself."

Meng Yao's cheeks flamed and he quickly reached out and squeezed Mingjue's hand, wishing fervently that they were back in Qinghe.

Having perfected the art of looking gormless, Huaisang was confident in his ability to deceive Jin Guangshan as he stepped out from behind a pillar and into the Sect Leader's path. He gasped as Jin Guangshan stopped short, his golden clad retinue's hands going to their swords.

"Oh! Sect Leader Jin!" said Huaisang breathlessly, kowtowing. "Please forgive my intrusion. I walked off to view your gardens and I got separated from my brother, and now I'm lost."

"That's alright Young Master Nie," said Jin Guangshan, making a small gesture for his guards to relax. "Though I must ask you to refrain from wandering without an escort. As things are now, I do not want to risk any further... incidents between your sect and mine."

"Of course! My apologies!" Huaisang bit his lip, his eyes sweeping the ground. "And... may I also say how terribly sorry I am for the way things went today."

Jin Guangshan raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"I wanted da-ge to resolve things with you amicably!" said Huaisang, wringing his hands. "But now everything's gotten caught up in this Chief Cultivator business and my sect has put you in an awkward position!"

A calculating light came into the Sect Leader's eyes and a sly smile crept across his face. He made a gesture at his men and after a moment they retreated out of earshot. He then turned back to Huaisang and said, "Is that so? Well, I appreciate your concern, and I am glad we share an opinion on this matter. I too was deeply disappointed that Sect Leader Nie was unwilling to cooperate with me."

"He angry about what happened with Meng Yao," lamented Huaisang. "They have become close friends and da-ge becomes so *irrational* whenever someone he cares about gets in danger. I hate to say anything bad about my brother, but it is the chink in his armour."

“I completely understand,” said Jin Guangshan grimly and Huaisang resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“However...” Huaisang batted his eyelashes at Jin Guangshan. The knife he had picked from Jin Zixun’s pocket lay heavy in his robes. “He’ll probably have had a chance to calm down by tonight, so maybe he will be more open to... suggestions. Especially given I am his heir.”

He smiled and wanted to grin when Jin Guangshan returned it. The Sect Leader then leaned forward a little and said softly, “I see. Well then, perhaps you and I should discuss some of these suggestions before you take them before your brother. Just so they are satisfactory to both parties, hm?” His eyes flickered briefly down to Huaisang’s lips. “Why don’t you come and have tea with me later this evening?”

Huaisang adopted an expression of naïve hopefulness. “Really? But Sect Leader, it will be late by then and I don’t want to keep you from your rest...”

“Not at all. How about you meet me in my quarters in an hour? Oh, and why don’t we keep this between ourselves so as not to worry anyone from your sect, or mine? It would be best if you’re not seen, so...” Jin Guangshan leaned in to whisper. “There’s an entrance to the my antechambers behind the largest camellia bush in the east garden.”

Huaisang let himself shiver a little, the young boy excited for a lascivious and forbidden meeting. “Alright. I will see you soon.”

Jin Guangshan smiled indulgently and walked over to join his entourage again. Huaisang waited until he was out of sight and smirk and snap out one of his fans, beginning to wander back towards their guests quarters. However, the minute he turned he startled with a gasp as he saw the solemn, purple-clad figure standing silently behind him.

“Ai! You scared me!” Huaisang gasped, raising a hand to his chest.

Jiang Cheng kept frowning and said, “You shouldn’t meet with him alone. Jie has told me he likes boys too, if they’re pretty enough.”

Huaisang smirked. “What? Jealous that I’ll be seduced by the great golden Sect Leader?”

“Worried that he’ll try to do something to you to get to your brother,” said Jiang Cheng, folding his arms. Huaisang raised his eyebrows and Jiang Cheng looked away. “Whatever. Just... if you do end up going, don’t try to seduce him. *That’s* what will make me jealous.”

Huaisang grinned and stepped forward, hooking his fingers into Jiang Cheng’s belt. “See, now that’s what I like to hear. I like you getting all protective like that.” Jiang Cheng turned to him and there was something in his gaze that gave Huaisang pause. “A-Cheng? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just...” Jiang Cheng’s cheeks flushed deep crimson as he cleared his throat. “A-Sang... do you think you could ever leave Qinghe?”

Huaisang stilled, eyes wide. Jiang Cheng swallowed and clarified, “I... since I saw my brother and Lan Wangji together in the Burial Mounds, it made me think about us, and I wanted to know if you could ever consider-.”

Huaisang raised his hand and placed his fingers gently on Jiang Cheng’s lips. He smiled as he was flooded with an elation unlike anything he had ever felt in either of his lives, and murmured, “Once we are through tomorrow, ask me about this again.”

Jiang Cheng stared at him then took the hand in his own and kissed its fingertips. “Alright. Be careful tonight.”

Huaisang hesitated. “There might be... a commotion.”

Jiang Cheng smiled. “If there is, I was walking with you in the gardens.” Huaisang raised his eyebrows, which Jiang Cheng countered with one of his own. “Don’t worry. With a brother like Wei Wuxian I spent most of my childhood coming up with alibis.”

Huaisang laughed and they parted, Huaisang slipping away into the shadows.

“Da-ge, I was being serious earlier,” said Meng Yao, delicately plucking Mingjue’s wandering hand from where it had drifted to his waist. They had just bid goodnight to Lan Xichen and were still standing by the closed door to the room.

Mingjue levelled him with a look that the Sect Leader would probably describe as righteous indignation, but was actually just a pout. “Why? We have privacy here...”

“And we are also still in danger,” replied Meng Yao smoothly. He pushed himself up onto tiptoes and kissed Mingjue’s cheek. “Besides, anticipation makes fulfilment sweeter, I’ve heard.”

“What empty headed poet said that?” grumbled Mingjue folding his arms. “At least stay here tonight then. I want to keep an eye on you.”

Meng Yao smiled and shook his head. “I’m not risking that scandal da-ge. Goodnight. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Mingjue let his hand slip slowly from his fingers and it was with no small reluctance that Meng Yao exited the room. He walked along the breezeway towards his rooms at the other end of the passage, breathing in the cool night air and looking out towards the moon that hung low in the sky.

It was because of his moongazing that he noticed the flicker of movement in the gardens their rooms look out towards. Frowning, Meng Yao stared into the darkness amongst the camellias and hydrangeas, straining his eyes for another flurry. Just as he was beginning to think he had imagined it, out of the corner of his eye he saw a shape that was undoubtedly a figure scuttle around the far corner of the building.

Narrowing his eyes, Meng Yao jumped down from the wooden walkway and hurried after them, manicured gravel crunching under his boots. He ducked around shrubbery and ponds until he reached the edge of the building and stared into the gloom beyond. He couldn't see anybody anymore, and he gathered his resentful energy in case of an attack. But he had only taken a step forward when he heard a distant scream behind him.

He spun around and listened, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling. He could hear an ever growing commotion coming from somewhere deeper in the estate complex, and a woman began to scream. The next thing he knew the air was filled with the resonance of the alarm bells and the entirety of Koi Tower seemed to spring to life. Meng Yao ran back towards his quarters just as Mingjue's doors flew open and he strode out into the breezeway, Baxia on his back, his exterior robes undone.

"What's going on?" asked Mingjue, frowning as Meng Yao approached through the bushes.

"I don't know," replied Meng Yao. "I thought I saw someone running through the garden and went to investigate, and then..."

Suddenly the doors at the end of the breezeway burst open and a veritable flood of Jin Cultivators came rushing through. One of them caught sight of Meng Yao and pointed, shouting, "There he is! Get him!"

The Jin Cultivators rushed forward and Meng Yao tensed, but before they could reach him Mingjue placed himself between them, his hand on Baxia's hilt. He cut an intimidating enough figure that the Jin Cultivators stopped dead, and he barked, "What is the meaning of this? Who are you to attack my advisor?"

One of the point men swallowed and said, "By order of Madam Jin, Meng Yao is to be placed under arrest."

Meng Yao raised his eyebrows. "On what charges?"

The man glared at him with a toxicity Meng Yao had never weathered before. "On the charge of murdering Sect Leader Jin!"

From the shadows of the other end of the corridor, Huaisang winced at this new turn of events. He should have figured Madam Jin would immediately pin the blame on Meng Yao, and Huaisang had to admit he would have pegged Meng Yao as the prime suspect if it were him delivering justice. However, he wasn't going to let this all fall apart at the final hurdle.

He checked to make sure there wasn't any blood on his hands, then hurried after the group, ready to rectify the issue.

The audience hall was packed and clamorous. It seemed that every cultivator in Koi Tower, including those from the visiting sects, were crowded amongst its pillars, and pandemonium reigned. No one was properly attired, and it seemed that Meng Yao, Mingjue and Huaisang

were the only people dressed. Even the ever composed Lans had their hair down and had merely throw their coats over their sleeping robes.

Meng Yao stayed close to Mingjue as they walked down the centre of the hall to the dais. Wei Wuxian was already there with the Lans, looking more solemn than Meng Yao had ever seen him before. Jiang Cheng was up on the dais with Jiang Yanli, who looked shaken but kept her head held high as she held her husband's arm. With a start, Meng Yao suddenly noticed Mo Xuanyu was clinging to her skirts, seemingly trying his best not to look out at the crowd. Beside them, Jin Zixuan looked stunned, his eyes wide and jaw slack. He looked to Meng Yao, a question in his eyes, and Meng Yao shook his head.

Slumped in her husband's throne was Madam Jin, her hair hanging lank around her face. She lifted her head as Meng Yao and Mingjue reached the bottom of the throne and her features twisted in rage.

"Why is that *thing* not in chains?" she spat, pointing at Meng Yao. "I told you to arrest him! He murdered you Sect Leader!"

"Madam Jin," interjected Mingjue firmly, "I am sorry for your loss, and I understand your anger, but there is no evidence that Advisor Meng was responsible for your husband's death."

"No evidence?" Madam Jin let out a shrill laugh. "In that creature's eyes my husband has done nothing but wrong him his entire life! Of course he would want him dead! And do not forget that he is a demonic cultivator. I'm sure someone willing to walk such an unclean path would be willing to murder for much less!"

Meng Yao remained expressionless as Mingjue replied, "Madam Jin, my advisor was with me at the time of your husband's murder."

"He is a demonic cultivator!" she repeated, a mad light in her eyes. "He probably sent some... some monster to kill him!"

"Mother, please," murmured Jin Zixuan, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think A-Yao did it. And pursuing him will just distract from finding the real culprit." He looked up at someone behind Meng Yao's party and beckoned them forward. "Show them the weapon."

A Jin cultivator came forward, delicately holding a long, cloth wrapped object. He approached the major Sect Leaders and flipped the cover back, revealing an intricate gold and silver dagger, its blade still stained with blood.

Mingjue snorted. "If you believe anything as gaudy as that was wielded by someone from my sect, you may be having trouble with your eyes."

"That's what he wants you to think! He's trying to frame someone from our Sect!" snapped Madam Jin, but she subsided after a gesture from her son.

"I doubt Yao-ge would take such a risk over someone like Jin Guangshan," drawled Wei Wuxian, folding his arms. "I'd say the culprit is someone less used to handling a slight."

Meng Yao's eyes drifted over to Jiang Yanli and then down to the little boy clinging to her legs. He frowned when he saw how Mo Xuanyu was staring at the dagger, unblinking and still. He took a step forward and said gently, "A-Yu... do you recognise this dagger?"

Mo Xuanyu's gaze flickered between him and the dagger before looking away once everyone's attention turned to him. Jiang Yanli stroked the top of his head as Jin Zixuan knelt in front of him and said softly, "A-Yu, if you know something, you have to tell us, okay? You won't be in trouble. We just want to catch the person who killed Father. Before they can hurt anyone else."

Mon Xuanyu licked his lips then leaned forward and whispered something in Jin Zixuan's ear. Jin Zixuan's eyes widened and he said, "You're certain?"

Mo Xuanyu nodded and Jin Zixuan stood up, his face darkening. Lan Xichen stepped forward and asked, "What did he say?"

Jin Zixuan swallowed, "He said... He said he's seen Jin Zixun with that dagger before."

Whispers erupted, but over them all there came a very clear cry of, "Ah!"

Meng Yao and the Sect Leaders turned to look at Huaisang, who stood a little behind them. He had been so quiet that Meng Yao had almost forgotten he was there. He flushed when all the room's gazes went to him, and he stuttered, "Oh, don't mind me, I don't- I mean I think I saw- but no, I don't know anything, really I don't know!"

"Huaisang," growled Mingjue, "if you saw something just say it."

Huaisang bit his lip before saying quietly, "Well... when I was out walking earlier... I thought I saw Jin Zixun in the gardens..."

"Just because he was in the gardens doesn't mean he murdered my husband!" said Madam Jin, a fractured note in her voice.

"Yes but..." Huaisang's hands writhed and Meng Yao narrowed his eyes.

After so many years being in the Nie family's service, especially after learning of the sharp mind Nie Huaisang often hid, Meng Yao had learnt to tell when the Young Master was lying. Everything about the boy in front of him seemed to be affected, and very suddenly he remembered Huaisang's mysterious vanishing act at the end of the conference.

"He seemed to be... moving as if he didn't want anyone to see him. And... he was moving towards the Sect Leader's private quarters," Huaisang continued, looking as though he may cry.

"Where is Young Master Jin now?" asked Jiang Cheng, frowning around the room.

There was a pause as everyone waited for the man in question to step forward, but there was only silence in response. Jin Zixuan narrowed his eyes and barked, "Find him! Now!"

Several Jin Cultivators hurried out of the room, and Madam Jin turned pleadingly to Jin Zixuan. “My son, what reason would Jin Zixun have for killing your father? Are you really taking the word of an urchin and the most unreliable man in the cultivation word over the faith in your own family?”

Meng Yao felt Mingjue tense, but before he could act rashly Meng Yao caught him by the arm. Mingjue glared down at him and Meng Yao murmured, “She’s in shock. You know she wouldn’t say those things about your if she was in her right mind. Let’s not add to her emotional distress by making a scene.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Mingjue relaxed, as did Meng Yao. He glanced back at Huaisang, who had produced a plain green fan and was hiding most of his face behind it.

“Father humiliated Jin Zixun earlier,” Jin Zixuan replied to his mother’s question. “It could have been revenge.”

Madam Jin scoffed. “What? You think that after one humiliation your cousin would be driven to murder? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Forgive me Madam Jin, but this was not his first humiliation at the hands of Sect Leader Jin,” said Jiang Yanli suddenly.

Jin Zixuan looked shocked and the memories abruptly returned to Meng Yao as he said, “The wedding feast.”

Jiang Yanli nodded. “Jin Zixun tried to rob Advisor Meng on our wedding night and was reprimanded for it. And ever since the incident at Yiling, Sect Leader Jin has been furious with him.”

“For a man who has always been favoured and indulged by the Sect Leader, this sudden change may have been too much for him to handle rationally,” said Meng Yao, allowing false sympathy to creep into his tone. “Especially if it was all revolving around a bastard like myself.”

“Even more so if that person has a terrible personality,” muttered Wei Wuxian, and Meng Yao noticed Lan Wangji nudge him.

At that moment the doors to the hall opened and a wide-eyed Jin cultivator stepped through. He offered a short bow to his leaders, then said, “We... We found him asleep in his quarters Young Mast- I mean, Sect Leader Jin.”

Jin Zixuan’s frown deepened. “Asleep? How could he sleep through all of this?”

The cultivator struggled for words, but at that moment two more men struggled their way into the hall, dragging Jin Zixun between them. A gasp ran around the hall at the sight of the Young Master. Smears of blood marred his golden robes, and his hair and clothes were mussed. As he shouted out against the perceived injustices against him it was easy to hear he was slurring his words.

Once he was flung to his knees before the dais, he shouted, “What’s the meaning of this? What did I do?”

Jin Zixuan glared down at his cousin, disgust curling his lip, and he gestured to the knife. “Do you recognise this?”

Jin Zixun looked to it and blinked a couple of times. Eventually he jutted his chin out and snapped, “It’s mine! What of it?”

“Drunken idiot,” muttered Mingjue. “I doubt he remembers.”

“This knife was used to slit my father’s throat not two hours ago,” growled Jin Zixuan. “And it appears you have his blood on your clothes.”

Jin Zixun froze before he said, “Uncle Jin is... dead?” Terror suddenly flooded his expression. “Wait, you don’t think I did this, do you? It wasn’t me!”

“I think you are a man who cannot control his impulses when he is drunk, as I have seen many times before,” snarled Jin Zixuan. He made a sharp gesture to his men. “Take him to the jailhouse.”

“No, no wait! Cousin it wasn’t me!” shrieked Jin Zixun as he was dragged away. “Aunty! Aunty, you know it wasn’t me!”

Madam Jin looked pale and drawn, unable to move from where she sat staring listlessly into space. Jiang Yanli glanced at her and grimaced hurrying forward to take her hand and murmur something to her.

Once Jin Zixun was out of the hall and his cries had faded, Jin Zixuan raised his head up and announced, “My friends, I am sorry for your disturbed rest, and I must ask you to return to your chambers. My family and I have... much to discuss, and we must be given time to mourn.”

The other sect leaders bowed to him and the rumble of voices resumed as people began to file out of the hall. Meng Yao looked up at his brother as Jin Zixuan began to rub at his eyes, exhaustion making him slouch. Then a hand laid on Meng Yao’s shoulder and he turned to Mingjue, who said, “Huaisang and I think it is best if we depart now. We don’t want to add to Madam Jin’s distress.”

Meng Yao nodded with a grimace. Over Mingjue’s shoulder he could see the Lans and Wei Wuxian conversing softly, no doubt discussing the same thing, given how Wei Wuxian kept glancing towards the doors. “Of course. Give me a moment, and I will come to gather my things.”

Mingjue nodded and Meng Yao turned and approached his brother. Jin Zixuan glanced up when Meng Yao reached him, and Meng Yao said softly, “I am sorry for your loss.”

Jin Zixuan glanced at him and shook his head. “You don’t have to be. He hurt you, and...”

On a whim, Meng Yao reached out and took his brother's hand, silencing him. He looked into amber eyes, so much like his own and murmured, "He was your father, A-Xuan. And you loved him. Just as he loved you."

Jin Zixuan's eyes glistened before he closed them, dipping his head. They stood like that for a moment, an indescribable feeling in Meng Yao's chest as Jin Zixuan squeezed his hand. Eventually his brother said softly, "You're leaving?"

Meng Yao nodded. "We thought it would be for the best to leave your family in peace. The matters of yesterday can be discussed at a later time."

Jin Zixuan nodded and muttered a quick thank you. After one final glance shared between them, they released each other's hands and Meng Yao retreated to help with their hasty retreat from Koi Tower. He knew Jin Zixuan would be in good hands during this trying time.

It was almost two hours later, when their group and the Lans were wandering down the darkened road to the next town, that tears began to flow down Meng Yao's cheeks. They surprised him, and he wiped at them furiously, his confusion only making the tightness in his chest worse.

It didn't take long for Mingjue, who was walking beside him, to notice. He gently took Meng Yao's arm and asked, "What's wrong?"

Meng Yao shook his head and sniffed. "I- I don't know. Perhaps I'm mourning an old dream."

Mingjue said nothing to that. Instead he merely wound his arm around Meng Yao's waist, enveloped him in his comforting warmth, and held him as they walked.

Despite the late hour, the innkeeper was able to find them all rooms once he realised who his distinguished guests were. It was good to have a roof over their heads and a chance to settle after the chaos, but Meng Yao didn't sleep a wink. And by the looks of everyone else in the morning, only the Lans managed to grab some shut eye.

They decided it was best not to linger, and so they grabbed a quick breakfast and get back on the road. It was decided they would walk with Wei Wuxian and the Lans until they reached the road to the Burial Mounds, upon which the Lans would go to Yiling to help negotiate a new place for the Wens to settle.

After such a restless night, Meng Yao trailed back from Mingjue and Lan Xichen, who were discussing the Chief Cultivator position. He was in no mood to discuss politics, and as such it gave Wei Wuxian the perfect opportunity to detach himself from Lan Wangji to come and speak with Meng Yao.

"A strange night, don't you think?" he said, his voice pitched low.

Meng Yao smiled mildly and replied, "A very strange night."

Wei Wuxian gave him a narrow look. “You didn’t have anything to do with it, did you?”

Meng Yao chuckled. “Of course not. I would have been too obvious of a suspect to take that risk.”

“Thought so.” Wei Wuxian glanced over his shoulder. “Strange that Nie Huaisang saw Jin Zixun sneaking to the Sect Leader’s quarters through the Nie quarters, isn’t it?”

Meng Yao paused. He did think it was strange. In fact he had thought about the strangeness of Huaisang’s testimony all night. But in the end he had decided that it was best to let certain sleeping dogs lie.

“It’s also a bit weird that Jiang Cheng disappeared for a bit around the same time that Huaisang did,” Wei Wuxian continued, his musing tone belied by the sharp light in his eyes. “And he was weirdly calm when we were told what had happened. Usually he’d be shouting a lot and his eyes go really big.” Wei Wuxian flashed an expression of theatrical horror. “But this time... nothing.”

“Sect Leader Jiang has had to grow up very quickly over the past year,” said Meng Yao. “He’s probably just learnt to get better control over his emotions.”

Wei Wuxian shrugged before pinning Meng Yao with a searching look. “Are you annoyed? That someone was able to kill him before you?”

Meng Yao was silent for a moment before replying, “A little. But I am content to be happy with the fact that a large issue has been removed from our lives and we can move on.” He smiled at Wei Wuxian, softly. “I have much to be grateful for and to hold dear right now. So a part of me is glad I won’t have the chance to ruin that pursuing revenge.”

Wei Wuxian nodded then looked back again. Meng Yao followed his gaze to where Huaisang seemed to be holding up a conversation with Lan Wangji.

“Do you think Chifeng-zun knows?” asked Wei Wuxian.

Meng Yao shook his head. “No. And I believe Huaisang wishes it to stay that way.” He smiled. “Consider that our repayment of our debt to him.”

From there Wei Wuxian thankfully dropped the subject and they were able to talk about the plans for the Wens. Wei Wuxian was hopeful they could settle near the Cloud Recesses, and Meng Yao shared that hope. He had a feeling Wen Qing would thrive in the scholarly environment of Gusu.

After another few hours, they finally came to the split off road. It was here they said their goodbyes to the Yiling bound group, and Meng Yao felt a little knot in his chest. Over the past weeks he had grown accustomed to the ebb and flow of Wei Wuxian’s lively spirit and Lan Wangji’s calming influence. He realised he was going to miss them.

“Pass my best wishes to Wen Qing and the others,” he said to Wei Wuxian as they bade farewell.

Wei Wuxian gave him a lopsided smile. “Sure you don’t want to say them yourself?”

Meng Yao shook his head. “I have to get back to my mother. I don’t even want to think about how much I’ve worried her.”

“Fair enough.” Wei Wuxian smiled at Lan Wangji, who stood at his elbow. “At least I’ll have some company for the rest of the trip home.”

Meng Yao glanced at Lan Wangji and said, “Please remember that Sect Leader Lan will be with you on that journey Young Master Lan. Best not to scar him.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes widened and he looked away quickly, his ears turning pink. Wei Wuxian cackled and replied, “Don’t worry, even I wouldn’t be so shameless as to do that in front of Zewu-Jun!”

“Do what?” asked the man in question, parting from Mingjue. Wei Wuxian waved a hand then went to help Lan Wangji organise the rest of the Yiling party. Lan Xichen watched them go bemusedly and said, “I’m not entirely clear as to how that happened, and I cannot say my uncle will be too pleased.”

Meng Yao laughed. “Well, point the blame at Huaisang. My understanding is that he took it upon himself to play matchmaker.”

“He understands my brother’s happiness almost as much as I do then.” Lan Xichen’s expression softened as he turned to Meng Yao. “I would say I am sorry for your loss, but no doubt your feelings are a little more complex than that.”

Meng Yao dipped his head. “Thank you… Xichen-ge.”

Lan Xichen smiled. “With everything that had happened, I never got the chance to tell you how impressed I was with how you handled it all. I don’t know many people who could keep their peace as well as you did under those circumstances. I doubt I could.”

“Xichen-ge is too kind.”

There was a pause before Lan Xichen continued, “I also wanted to thank you for looking after da-ge. I haven’t seen him this happy in a very long time, and his sabre spirit has never been so calm.” He gave Meng Yao a searching look. “I hope he also makes you happy?”

Meng Yao glanced past the Lan sect leader to Mingjue, who was watching them with something that wasn’t quite apprehension. Meng Yao smiled reassuringly and Mingjue looked away, but not before Meng Yao caught the warm up turn of his lips. “He does. He makes me happier than I’ve ever been.”

Lan Xichen’s smile was like sunlight. “I am most glad then.”

And so it was with a warm feeling that the two groups parted, and the Nies made their way back towards the Unclean Realm. Even though they travelled many miles, it didn’t seem very long at all until the mountains and pines of Qinghe loomed up around them.

And before Meng Yao knew it they were approaching the iron gates of the fortress and he was running towards the green-clad figure waiting at the door. He collided with his mother in a bone-breaking hug and they sank to the dirt, both crying wordlessly. They stayed like that until Mingjue and Huaisang came to gently pick them up and guide them back into their home.

Chapter End Notes

It has been a million years, and I'm sorry for that, but a lot has happened. My computer has finally broken enough that I'll need another one and my state went back into lockdown. Both not great for the inspiration flow :(

However, I am back, I like this chapter, and the next one will be the grand fluffy finale! Thank you all so much for your lovely comments, and for enjoying my story!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Meng Yao was pleased to find that the Unclean Realm hadn't fallen apart in their absence, and even his meticulous budgeting and scheduling system had been preserved through his mother's efforts. However, what surprised him was the overwhelming warmth and happiness he was greeted with from his subordinates upon returning to the archiving room. He had never received so many well wishes in his life, and it only took one look at the stressed expressions of the Nie cultivators to figure out why. It seemed his efforts to make the sect run smoothly had finally been recognised.

He spent the day after their return pouring over the reports that had been processed over the past few weeks, and strangely enough he enjoyed returning to the paperwork. And this time he had more company, with two or three disciples always happy to help him now.

As such, the only true casualty of their time away was some of the new seedlings in the garden.

"A shame," Meng Yao sighed as he pulled out another dead flowering seedling. "I was looking forward to seeing these in the spring."

"Next year," replied Mingjue, who was doing the same in one of the other garden beds.

It was a chilly evening, two days after their return. The sun was setting, painting the sky with bright orange and gold. The two of them had taken their dinner early, as this was the first opportunity they'd had to tend to the garden without being exhausted. It was also the first opportunity they'd had to be alone.

Meng Yao pulled out another dead plant before pausing to look over at his partner. Mingjue was frowning down at his work, but there was no anger in his face, only a small wrinkle of concentration between his eyebrows. Meng Yao smiled as he watched the coarse warrior rip out the dead seedling whilst tenderly, almost politely, moving the leaves of the living plants aside. It didn't feel like that long ago that Meng Yao had thought this man was incapable of being gentle, or feeling anything either than a sense of duty or anger.

It hadn't been that long ago that Meng Yao had thought it was impossible for his feelings to be returned.

With a short exhalation Meng Yao rose and walked over to crouch behind the sect leader, then reached up to take his shoulders. He pressed a kiss against his shoulder blades as Mingjue turned to him, then craned his neck and pressed their lips together. Mingjue paused for a moment then turned and shifted forward, cupping the back of Meng Yao's head and deepening the kiss.

As Mingjue began to pull him closer, Meng Yao drew back and murmured, “Let’s go inside...”

Mingjue stared at him from a moment before lunging forward and scooping Meng Yao up in a bridal hold. Meng Yao squeaked and tried to look annoyed but it was a hard feat to manage with his heart pounding like it was.

Mingjue crossed back to the doors to his quarters and pushed his way inside, kicking it shut with a bang once they were through. He strode across the dimly lit room and dropped Meng Yao onto the bed. Heat flared in Meng Yao’s stomach as he pushed up onto his elbows, only to be pushed back down against the sheets as their lips met again. Meng Yao opened to the kiss and Mingjue’s tongue pushed in, the sounds becoming wet and lewd. Their hands intertwined above Meng Yao’s head and he sighed as Mingjue pinned him, the show of strength sending hot lightning shooting through him.

The heat was quickly becoming unbearable, so Meng Yao broke the kiss and leaned up to murmur in Mingjue’s ear, “I want you to fuck me.”

He nipped his partner’s earlobe and Mingjue groaned. Meng Yao tilted his head as Mingjue kissed a trail of fire along the line of his jaw and down...

But then his lips brushed Meng Yao’s neck and he flinched. Frustration screamed through him as Mingjue stopped and pulled back. Meng Yao cursed him for his kind, loving concern as he asked, “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

Meng Yao shook his head quickly and looped his now free arms around Mingjue’s neck. “It’s nothing. Come on, I want you...”

“Meng Yao.” Mingjue tone was firm but tender. “Tell me if you don’t want something.”

Meng Yao looked up into Mingjue’s kind, understanding eyes, and he sighed. “I just... I don’t like it when my neck is touched.” Mingjue’s eyes widened, but before any guilt could sneak in, Meng Yao said quickly, “It’s not just what happened between us. I...”

The words caught in Meng Yao’s throat, inexplicably. His breathing became short and he shook his head, trying to clear it. Then he felt a warm palm against his cheek and a soft kiss was laid against his brow, and he realised he was safe.

“When I was in Qishan...” Meng Yao swallowed. “When Wen Ruohan... had me, he would be... very cruel.”

Meng Yao stilled and waited, expecting anger. He saw a brief flash in Mingjue’s face, but it was gone the next instant. Then the sect leader pressed another kiss to his lips and moved down, opening Meng Yao’s robes as he went, kissing down his chest. “Then I will be loving.”

Meng Yao breath stuttered and the muscles of his stomach jumped as Mingjue’s lips ghosted over them. There was a moment of awkwardness as Meng Yao struggled to get completely out of his robes and Mingjue dragged his pants off. But then Meng Yao was naked and flushed upon the sheets, transfixed as Mingjue removed his own robes, revealed pale skin and

flexing muscles. Meng Yao's cheeks burned and Mingjue grinned as he slid off his pants. "Like what you see?"

Meng Yao propelled himself up and dusted his partner's chest with kisses in response. "You have oil?"

Mingjue twisted, reaching for something on the bedside table, and Meng Yao giggled when he saw it was a jar of sword polishing oil. He wasn't laughing for long as Mingjue suddenly knelt before him, bent forward and licked a long trail up his cock. Meng Yao's moan could have made the walls blush, and after that he couldn't help himself as Mingjue's mouth brought him to full hardness. Without warning, an oiled finger breached him and he cried out. Slowly Mingjue worked him open, stretching and slicking that tight ring of muscle and almost coyly brushing over the spot that made sparks flash in Meng Yao's vision. Pleasure coiled tighter and tighter inside him, and before it snapped he managed to gasp, "Mingjue-inside- please! I'm ready! I want you- inside!"

With a filthy popping noise, Mingjue complied, and Meng Yao gasped as he was dragged further up the bed. Suddenly Mingjue was looming above him, his gaze roving over Meng Yao's body, and that made his cheeks burn worse than anything.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Mingjue muttered, looking up to lock his gaze with Meng Yao's. "Are you sure you're ready?"

Meng Yao nodded fervently. "Fuck me. Now!"

Mingjue leaned down and kissed him again. He then pulled back, hooked Meng Yao's legs around his waist and pushed forward.

Meng Yao cried out as the huge length pushed up inside him. He felt more stretched and full than he had ever been, and it was *infuriating* but *blissful* how slowly Mingjue was moving. When Mingjue bottomed out Meng Yao bit his lip, conscious of the noise he was making.

Then Mingjue pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth and muttered, "Let me hear you. Let them all hear." He began to move, long rolling thrusts that drew out Meng Yao's voice every time he hit that spot. "I've waited for this... for so long... you know how hard it was, having someone so beautiful be yours, but not being able to touch?"

"Yes!" cried Meng Yao, and Mingjue growled and began to move faster.

Meng Yao's breath came in staccato gasps as the room filled with the sounds of their fucking. He flung his arms around Mingjue shoulders, nails digging into skin and his teeth fastening down on flesh. Mingjue groaned and his large hand darted down between them and began to stroke Meng Yao's cock.

Meng Yao lost all concept of time as he was consumed by the pleasure. The sensations seemed to drag out unbearably, but the next thing he new he felt himself trembling and he managed to gasp out, "I- I'm close-!"

"Come for me," hissed Mingjue.

One final stroke was all it took. Meng Yao's vision went white and his back arched as his orgasm slammed through him. He was vaguely aware of wetness on his stomach and Mingjue began to fuck him harder, before he felt the spurt of warmth inside him as Mingjue stiffened then fucked through his own release.

They cooled down in each other's arms, Meng Yao slowly drifting back to himself with Mingjue pressing kisses against his jaw and cheek. Eventually Mingjue pulled out and hurried away to find something to clean themselves off with. Once they were clean, the sect leader tucked them both under the sheets and slung his arm over Meng Yao's waist.

A linger sense of propriety made Meng Yao mutter, "I should probably return to my rooms before anyone..."

"Don't you dare," growled Mingjue, pulling him closer. "You're my cultivation partner, so they'll have to deal with their own scandalised feelings."

A warm feeling bloomed in Meng Yao's chest, and he couldn't help but turn to press a kiss to Mingjue's brow. With that he let himself relax and sleep came to claim him.

Mingjue woke to the sound of Huaisang's songbirds, but for once it didn't annoy him. He turned to see his advisor sleeping on his side beside him, facing him. Faint morning light caught on a creamy shoulder and those plump, rosy lips were parted slightly in slumber. Love welled up inside Mingjue and he propped himself up on his elbow, allowing himself a moment to just indulge in Meng Yao's peacefulness.

For all he had grown to love the little crease of concentration between Meng Yao's brows, or the sharpness of his amber eyes, he liked seeing him relax too. He didn't do that enough. Mingjue hoped he would be able to change that.

He reached out and tenderly stroked a lock of Meng Yao's hair back from his face, only to feel a pang of regret when the young man started and his eyes blinked open. That slight regret was worth it for the adorable look of confusion that flittered across his face, followed by a warm smile.

"Da-ge," Meng Yao murmured, readjusting his head on the pillows. "What time is it?"

"Still early," replied Mingjue, reaching out to continued stroking his hair.

Meng Yao yawned and said, "I suppose I should return to my quarters before anyone notices..."

Mingjue sighed. "You don't have to."

"Yes, I do. At least until- *oh!*"

Mingjue couldn't help but smirk as his well-timed stroke along Meng Yao's cock had the desired effect. Meng Yao glared at him over his shoulder, and he said, "I'll stop if you want."

Meng Yao rolled onto his side, facing away from Mingjue, but kept his hand in place as he muttered, “Don’t you dare.”

Mingjue grinned and continued stroking, relishing the little moans and noises he drew out of his partner. His other hand snaked down and ran around Meng Yao’s entrance, still loose and wet from the previous night, and he murmured, “Can I...?”

“Yes!” came the hissed reply, and Mingjue reached for the oil again.

It didn’t take much to completely relax Meng Yao, and once again Mingjue slid into the glorious tight heat. His groan mingled with Meng Yao’s keen, and he gave Meng Yao a moment to adjust before beginning to move. It was slow and lazy, and rolling pleasure rather than the fire of the previous night. As Mingjue was languidly pulled closer to his release, he felt a sharp spike of desire when he suddenly realised that he could take his time with things like this now, for Meng Yao was his, just as much as he was Meng Yao’s.

They fucked slowly for a long time, but eventually Mingjue spilled into Meng Yao with a groan, and Meng Yao came with a cry. They lay still for a moment, breathing laboured, before Meng Yao twisted around to frown at him. “That was unfair. You can’t distract me like that.”

Mingjue raised an eyebrow. “Oh? You didn’t seem to mind.”

Meng Yao rolled his eyes and sat up, sliding away from Mingjue’s cock. “No, but my point stands. I should go before anyone sees.”

“Why?”

“Because we are unmarried, da-ge. Extramarital affairs aren’t exactly received with open arms in Qinghe.”

Mingjue shrugged. “Simple solution then. Marry me.”

Meng Yao froze and stared at him like his head had fallen off. “What?”

Nerves suddenly tore through Mingjue as he realised the gravity of his words. He kept up his brave face though, and ploughed forward. “You’re my cultivation partner Meng Yao. Marriage isn’t that far of a leap.”

Meng Yao gaped at him, seemingly speechless, for a moment, before spluttering, “Da-ge! Marriage is- you can’t- we couldn’t possibly-!”

“Why not?”

“Many reasons!” Meng Yao threw up his hands. “My birth! I am-.”

“My advisor and the son of a sect leader.”

“And a prostitute,” said Meng Yao pointedly.

“Who is also a trusted archivist of the Qinghe Nie Sect,” replied Mingjue, mustering smoothness he hadn’t known he possessed.

“I am also a demonic cultivator.”

Mingjue shrugged. “If I can see beyond that, then I don’t doubt many others will. Especially after everything you’ve done for our sect.” The idea was becoming more and more appealing by the second. Mingjue reached out and wove his fingers with Meng Yao’s. “Come now A-Yao. Marry me.”

Meng Yao swallowed and looked away. There was a long, heavy silence before he said, “You are in earnest?”

“I swear on my parent’s graves.” Mingjue squeezed the slender hand cupped in his own. “I love you A-Yao. I want you more than anything.”

Meng Yao turned to him again and there were tears in his eyes. “Wait until my brother has officially ascended, and the Chief Cultivator has been chosen. And then... And then I will marry you.”

Elation made Mingjue surge up and capture Meng Yao’s lips with his own and they tumbled back onto the sheets, their laughter and smiles making the room seem bright.

“Would it be too much to ask for silks from Yunmeng? I don’t care what anyone says, they make the best silks!” Meng Shi sighed, then clapped her hands in delight. “Oh! My little boy, getting married! And to such a handsome and kind man!” She winked at Meng Yao, who sat across from her. “Not to mention rich.”

“Mother!” Meng Yao laughed, setting down his teacup. He was delighted to bring some joy to his mother’s life.

She patted his hand across the table. “Don’t worry dear, I’ll keep it quiet for now. But the second a Chief Cultivator is chosen, I am telling *everybody*. Oh, A-Sang and I are going to have so much fun.”

“You two will be a force to be reckoned with, I’m sure,” said Meng Yao.

Meng Shi’s smile softened and she said, “In all seriousness A-Yao, I am happy for you. He is a good and honourable man, and I am sure he will make you very happy.”

“Thank you mother.” Meng Yao hesitated, tapping a fingernail against the tabletop. “We... We haven’t talked about Jin Guangshan.”

His mother went completely still, like the surface of a cold lake. Meng Yao licked his lips and said quickly, “If you don’t want to, we don’t have to.”

“No. No, it’s just...” Meng Shi sighed, her shoulders slumping forward slightly. “I don’t know how I feel. I loved that man for so long. Or loved the idea of him. When I heard he had died I went to my room and cried for an hour. I don’t know why. My love for him died when

I was shown what love really was here.” She smiled at him, melancholic. “I’m sorry. I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

“It’s alright mother. I… I felt the same.” Meng Yao tilted his head back. “I… I am glad though. I’ve been wondering recently, about what would have happened to me if I had pursued a connection with that man. I think that only bad things would have come from it.” He lifted a hand to his chest, massaging the tightness there and feeling the resentful energy flowing just below his skin. “I think I could be quite terrible, if the right things pushed me to terribleness.”

“Have you been talking to A-Sang?” Meng Yao looked at his mother, surprised, and she smiled. “Even when he was younger he had a preoccupation with keeping you on the right path and wondering about terrible futures. It always made me wonder if he could see things the rest of us couldn’t.”

Meng Yao was silent for a moment, thinking. He then sighed and said, “I understand now why he hides his true talents, but at the same time, I could certainly use him as a more respected ally in politics.”

“But then the Nie Clan won’t have its secret weapon!” Meng Shi settled back in her chair. “Speaking of secrets, I have been learning the Song of Clarity.”

Meng Yao raised his eyebrows. “Truly? How?”

“When you were ill, I was in your room and I found Sect Leader Lan’s notes. I got one of the Nie cultivators to help me with the basics, and now I am practising every day!” Her smile became sad. “I didn’t want to let your gift go to waste any longer. And… I wanted to be able to protect you better. For a while there I was worried that-.”

She choked off suddenly and lifted her sleeve to cover her mouth. Pain twisted Meng Yao’s heart as he said, “Mother, there wasn’t anything you could have done. I put myself in that situation. And besides, I’m alright now!”

“I know. But I am determined to do more from now on.”

“You have already done so much. Before we met the Nie brothers you always showed me love and made me feel like the world wasn’t so unfair. And that means the world to me.”

Meng Shi smiled at him, her eyes shining. “I suppose now we can truly move on from all of that. No more dwelling in the past, yes? Let’s look to our happier future.”

“No more,” agreed Meng Yao, her small hand warm in his.

Nie Huaisang couldn’t remember the last time he had had nothing to worry about. It was a strange emptiness, not having that constant anxiety. Jin Zixuan was sworn in as Sect Leader Jin a few days after his father’s death, and immediately set to work purging the corruption his father had been cultivating over many years within the Jin Sect and its allies. Just over a month later there had been a small conference of the Sect Leaders and Lan Xichen had been

unanimously elected as the new Chief Cultivator. He had accepted with his usual humility, and so far he was doing an excellent job at handling the many gripes and groans of the other sects.

Of course, upon this announcement, Huaisang had immediately wanted to announce his brother's engagement to the entire world and start organising a party that would put the Jins to shame. However, Meng Yao had annoyingly come up with the idea for the watchtowers, and so he, Mingjue and Lan Xichen had become ensconced in getting that up and running for another four months.

And then, just as that was settling, Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli's baby had selfishly decided to come a bit early, so Meng Yao had rushed to Koi Tower in great haste to meet his nephew. Huaisang had reluctantly agreed with Mingjue that it would be best to wait until after the one month celebration to make the announcement.

But then, Jiang Yanli, goddess that she was, had managed to gently coerce Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue to making the announcement at the party. As a bonus joy, it had been met with less scandal than expected because everyone was still reeling over Lan Wangji choosing Wei Wuxian as a cultivation partner; even as a bastard, Meng Yao looked like the most refined bachelor in the world compared to his rambunctious friend.

It was amongst the celebrations that Jiang Cheng had pulled Huaisang aside and said quietly, "You asked me to wait until after things had settled..."

"Da-ge has no sense of style and Yao-ge will want a ceremony that's too understated, so I have to stay until the wedding, but after that feel free to whisk me away," said Huaisang with a grin.

Jiang Cheng had looked stunned. "You- You really want to-?"

Huaisang had kissed him in response, arms slung around his neck. When he had pulled back he murmured, "Come to Qinghe soon. Da-ge's in a good mood, so he probably won't fight you as much."

Which was how Huaisang found himself standing to the left of his brother's throne shooting a nervous grin at Meng Yao, who was giving him a sly look, as Mingjue glared down at Jiang Cheng.

Huaisang knew better than anyone how intimidating Mingjue could be, so he was impressed with how well Jiang Cheng was hiding his nerves. But then Mingjue rounded the glare on Huaisang and he had to resist the urge to cringe back.

"How long has this been going on?" demanded Mingjue.

Huaisang let out a wheezing laugh. "Oh, you know. Casually since we were at the Cloud Recesses."

"Oh? So this little liaison wouldn't have anything to do with the abysmal test results you got during that time?" snapped Mingjue. He then turned to Meng Yao. "Did you know about

this?"

"I suspected," said Meng Yao diplomatically. "But da-ge, even if it has been a somewhat... illicit affair until now, Sect Leader Jiang is doing the right thing by proposing. And you must admit, it is a more than eligible match."

"Huaisang is meant to be my heir," grumbled Mingjue, though Huaisang was relieved to hear his voice was lacking its usual bite.

"You and Yao-ge have been thinking of adopting, don't deny it!" said Huaisang quickly. "Besides, I don't even want to be Sect Leader. You know that da-ge."

Mingjue frowned at him for a long time before turning back to Jiang Cheng. Jiang Cheng kept his chin held high and after a long time Mingjue asked, "You love my brother?" Jiang Cheng's cheeks turned pink but he nodded, making Huaisang feel all warm and fuzzy. "Do you promise to protect him and treat him well?" Jiang Cheng nodded again and Mingjue turned to Huaisang. "And this is what will make you happy?"

Huaisang smiled at him and murmured, "Yes. I am certain it will."

Mingjue's expression softened and he sighed. "Well, I may not understand this, but if this makes you happy then you have my blessing."

Huaisang beamed and he lunged forward to catch his brother in a tight embrace. "Thank you da-ge!"

Mingjue grunted and patted his arm. When Huaisang released Mingjue, he looked up and saw Meng Yao bowing to him. "A-Sang, Sect Leader Jiang, you have my sincerest congratulations. I wish prosperity for you both."

"Thanks Yao-ge," chimed Huaisang happily.

Jiang Cheng dipped his head towards the throne. "Yes, thank you. And I wish the same for you and Sect Leader Nie."

"Ah, what a relief!" said Huaisang, leaning against Mingjue's throne. "Now I can really concentrate on planning your wedding da-ge!"

Huaisang took no small amount of delight from the look of apprehension on Mingjue's face.

In the end Meng Yao and Mingjue had been able to form a united front and talked Huaisang and Meng Shi down from inviting seven hundred people. Mingjue had also been firm that the decorations wouldn't be too outlandish, so the organising team had concocted a hall hung in traditional wedding colours but lacking the lavish ornamentation of the Jins.

The true luxury came in the form of the couple's wedding robes, which Meng Shi had personally overseen the making of. They had stolen Meng Yao's breath away when he'd seen them lying on his bed in the morning. They were made of the smoothest red silk Meng Yao had ever felt with the crest of the Qinghe Nie Sect embroidered in gold on their back. But

then, when he had looked closer, Meng Yao saw the intricate golden pine spruces embroidered into the sleeves. The final touch had been the golden pin his mother had handed to him with a smile, a golden peony carved into the end of it.

“A gift from your brother,” she murmured as she gently pinned his hair with it.

The rest of the day had passed in a blur for Meng Yao. He had greeted guests with a smile, laughed with his friends, eaten delicious food, but he had felt as though he were doing it all floating on a cloud. He only felt grounded when he made eye contact with ever-steady, ever-comforting Mingjue, who always had a smile for him. And the only moment he had felt in stark clarity had been when they exchanged their cups and were bound to each other, for it simultaneously felt surreal and also like the culmination of everything Meng Yao had ever wanted. The joy he felt enveloped him and brought tears to his eyes.

Very suddenly he was no longer the boy sweeping the street outside the brothel, sporting a black eye. For all intents and purposes, he was Madam Nie.

“I have to think of a new title,” he had said vaguely at the banquet, making Mingjue chuckle and Meng Shi burst into happy tears for the fifth time that day.

It was shaping up to be a long evening, so Meng Yao and Mingjue slipped away to their quarters before too much alcohol had been consumed. Once they were back in Mingjue’s- or their- quarter’s, it didn’t take them long to slip each other’s robes off and fall back onto the bed. They fucked slowly, both letting moans spiral from their throats and into the air, not caring who heard. All Meng Yao cared about was that it was his *husband* who felt so good inside him, his *husband* who was moaning his name, his *husband* who spilled inside him.

As they lay warm in each other’s arms afterwards, catching their breath, Meng Yao murmured, “How can anyone wait until marriage for that?”

Mingjue snorted. “Xichen says it has something to do anticipation.”

Meng Yao glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. “You have spoken to Lan Xichen about sex?”

“We were teenagers!” said Mingjue with a laugh.

He reached out and stroked Meng Yao’s hair back, his expression softening. Something in his eyes made Meng Yao reach out and cup his cheek, murmuring, “What’s the matter love?”

Mingjue shook his head. “It’s strange that Huaisang will be leaving soon. I was just thinking... he was the one who brought us together.”

“Mmm.” Meng Yao’s gaze passed over the hard planes of his husband’s face that he had once found intimidating. “I suppose he feels he can move on, now that his work is done.”

“You truly believe he will be happy in Yunmeng?”

Meng Yao nodded. “I do. He will like the weather and the culture. And I think he will be most suited to the life of the pampered spouse of a Sect Leader. Especially Sect Leader Jiang. That young man needs someone like Huaisang to help him along.”

Mingjue exhaled heavily and rolled onto his back, cushioning his head with his hand. “I wish my mother had been here. And Huaisang’s. They would have liked you.”

“And my mother would have had people to weep with,” laughed Meng Yao. He tilted his head as he propped himself up on his elbows. “What about you father?”

Mingjue shook his head. “I loved him, but he wouldn’t have understood this. I wouldn’t have wanted him here if he would make this day unhappy.” There was a pause before Mingjue glanced at him and smiled. “We should talk more about adopting a child as well.”

Meng Yao leaned forward and coaxed Mingjue into a gentle, deep kiss. When he opened his eyes again he pulled back and murmured, “I want to raise a child with you. But not because you think you are going to die young. I married you so that we can grow old together, or cultivate together. And I am going to do everything in my power to reign in that sabre spirit. Understand?”

Mingjue stared at him then nodded. “A promise to each other then. Neither of us will die young.”

Meng Yao nodded, tracing a small circle above Mingjue’s collarbone. After a moment he smiled and asked, “When was the first time you liked me? Did you have ulterior motives when you took my mother and me in?”

Mingjue lifted his head. “Of course not! Huaisang was the one who encouraged me to take you in. Not that I didn’t- I mean, I didn’t think-.”

“Don’t hurt yourself love, I’m teasing,” said Meng Yao with a smile.

Mingjue paused then let out a breathy laugh. There were a few beats of silence before the sect leader continued, “There wasn’t a particular moment. I knew I felt close to you during the Sunshot Campaign. And I always admired you work ethic. I think... I think a really knew after the Phoenix Mountain hunt.”

Meng Yao picked at the threads in the sheets. “I loved you during the Sunshot Campaign. But then I went to Qishan and... I thought this could never happen.”

“After what I did to you I don’t blame you for thinking that.”

Meng Yao shook his head. “That wasn’t it. Well, it was a bit. But it was more that I thought your actions showed what you truly felt about me. I’d shown how duplicitous I could be, how cruel I could be by working for that man, and I thought you could never love someone like that.” He swallowed. “I’ve even caught myself doubting up until this moment.”

Mingjue pulled him to his chest and Meng Yao let himself relax into the embrace, revelling in the warmth of Mingjue’s arms. His husband’s chest rumbled under his cheek as he said, “I was too harsh. I know. I think I’ve realised some things require some... underhandedness. Just promise that you will always be honest with me. No secrets between us.”

“I promise,” said Meng Yao immediately, and his heart soared when he realised he wasn’t even lying to himself.

As his remaining walls against this man he loved so much crumbled, and for the first time in a long time the resentful energy quietened, he let his eyes drift close and allowed himself to be happy.

It was strange, standing in his room with all his fans and art missing from the walls and the air quiet without the bird songs. Huaisang fanned himself with one of the pretty silver fans Meng Yao had bought him long ago, a tight feeling in his chest. In the other future he had never wanted to leave these rooms, not wanting to move into rooms that should have been occupied by his brother. And now everything was well, and he was leaving them willingly tomorrow when Jiang Cheng came to fetch him, a thought that made him want to sing in excitement, and he still felt somewhat reluctant to leave.

There was a soft knock on the door behind him and he turned just as Meng Yao stepped into the room. He was wearing dull grey robes, but his face still had the resplendent, happy glow Huaisang had grown used to seeing now. They smiled at each other as Meng Yao approached him and said, “All ready?”

Huaisang nodded. “It’s weird. This barely feels like my room anymore.”

“I’ll make sure it’s decorated appropriately for when you come to visit,” said Meng Yao with a grin. He then sighed, his expression softening as he said, “Ah, I’m going to miss you A-Sang. My mother will too. Expect many visits from her.”

“I will require them!” cried Huaisang in mock offence. “I love my fiancé dearly, but he lacks the artistic refinements of Meng Shi.”

Meng Yao chuckled and they lapsed into a comfortable silence. After a moment Meng Yao said softly, “I would like to thank you, A-Sang.”

Huaisang blinked. “For what?”

Meng Yao made a vague gesture. “All of this. I don’t know what exactly you were thinking of when you took my mother and me in, but...” He took a short breath. “I believe I have every reason to be indebted to your kindness. Probably more reason than I could ever know of.”

Huaisang felt warmth bloom in his chest as he murmured, “It was my pleasure. You can make it up to me by making my da-ge happy until the day he dies.”

Meng Yao dipped his head then tilted it towards the door. “Come. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Huaisang nodded and replied, “You go on ahead. I just want to take one last look at the gardens.”

They followed each other out of the room and then separated at the path into the gardens. Huaisang wove his way amongst darkened plants and ponds, moving towards the Sect Leader's quarters, before he finally found what he was looking for.

The pond was a simple design, as all things in Qinghe gardens were, edged by tall reeds and spanned by a squat stone bridge. Huaisang stood on the bridge and looked down at the dark water below him, the stars and a distant square of lantern light reflected in its mirror like surface.

He couldn't remember if it had been a warm night like this one. He couldn't even remember if he'd fallen from the bridge or from the bank. All he could remember was the loneliness and the wrongness of everything. He had no brother, no friends. No tutor turned friend turned mother. He had been the laughingstock of the cultivation world. He and Jiang Cheng's grief and rage had made them slide past each other like oil over water. Nothing had been like it should have been. It had all gone so wrong, like a terrible nightmare.

Or was this part the dream?

With a deep breath and anxiety making his vision sharp, Huaisang pitched forward into the water.

The world went dark and muffled as he was engulfed by cold water. But there was no startling snap awake, no gasping breath as he surfaced into his terrible reality. Just the slimy bottom of the pond.

He broke the surface of the water, gasping and hooting from the cold, and stood up. The water barely came past his knees, and his robes cascaded water, now heavy and sodden.

“Huaisang!”

Huaisang looked up as his brother came crashing through the bushes at the far end of the pond, spirit fire in his hand and confusion on his face. “What the hell are you doing?”

Huaisang stared at him for a second before bursting into uncontrollable laughter. Mingjue watched him with deepening confusion until Huaisang managed to giggle, “I tripped and fell in!”

The concern that had been building in Mingjue's expression vanished as he frowned and snapped, “You idiot! Be more careful! Here, I'll help you out.”

Huaisang waded over to the bank and let his brother haul him up onto the bank, still giggling as he said, “Goodness, I hope this isn't a new habit of mine! My new home is full of water!”

“Get your husband to teach you how to swim,” said Mingjue sternly. “Come on, we'll find you some robes. Perhaps some of A-Yao's would fit...”

“Da-ge, your husband is very small. Just because everyone shorter than you looks to be the same height to you doesn't mean they are.”

That drew a smile out of Mingjue as they began to walk. They picked their way through the bushes to a path and proceeding on towards Mingjue's quarters. When they were on the path, Mingjue suddenly asked, "Everything's better, right?"

Huaisang glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

"When you were younger, you told me you had visions of a dark future. This one is better, yes?"

They rounded a corner and saw Meng Yao waiting for them on one of the verandas, Meng Shi by his side. Mingjue's face lit up and Huaisang smiled at him, murmuring, "Yes. So much better."

When they got to the veranda he laughed off the Mengs fretting when they saw the state of him and stepped up into the lantern light. Meng Shi and Meng Yao wrestled his sodden outer robe off his and hustled him indoors. Mingjue slid the door shut behind them and Huaisang left the shadows behind.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaand that's a wrap folks! My goodness, what a happy-sad moment I am having right now! Never thought I would get to the end of this thing!

Thank you all so much for reading and enjoying and leaving your lovely comments and kudos! Your enjoyment kept me going! I hope to see you in the NieYao fandom/MDZS fandom again soon!

End Notes

First long fic in a loooong time. Updates will be inconsistent because of life, but I am determined to finish this. Thanks for reading!

Btw I have a [tumblr](#) if anyone's interested! You can come yell at me.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!